The Spurned Viscountess
Shelley Munro

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By Shelley Munro

Refreshed version of *Second Seduction*, newly revised by author.

Cursed with the sight and rumors of witchcraft, Rosalind's only chance at an ordinary life is marriage to Lucien, Viscount Hastings. She doesn't expect love, only security and children of her own. Determined to go through with the wedding, she allows nothing she encounters at the gloomy Castle St. Clare to dissuade her.

Recently returned from the Continent, Lucien has no time for the English mouse his family has arranged for him to marry—not when he's plotting to avenge the murder of his beloved Francesca. He has no intention of bedding Rosalind, not even to sire an heir.

Though spurned by her bridegroom, Rosalind turns to him for protection when she is plagued by a series of mysterious accidents and haunted by terrifying visions. Forced to keep Rosalind close—and tempted into passionate kisses—Lucien soon finds himself in grave danger of falling in love with his own wife…

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Dedication

To Paul—you’re a star, and I love you.

Acknowledgements

I’d like to thank Deborah Nemeth, my editor, for helping me shape Rosalind and Lucien’s story. I’m so pleased with the final result and couldn’t have done it without you.

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Chapter One

East Sussex, England, 1720

“Hastings, the carriage is coming. Your betrothed has arrived.”

Lucien rose from a square-backed chair, flicked the lace at his cuffs and studied the elderly man stepping away from the window—the man who claimed him as son. “My name is Lucien.”

The earl ruffled up like a feisty bantam cock. “Stuff and nonsense! George is your christened name. If it’s good enough for the king, it’s good enough for you.”

Lucien strolled past shelves of books and paused to finger an amber figurine from the Orient. From what he’d heard since his arrival in England, people disapproved of the king, who hailed from Hanover. The man didn’t even speak English. Lucien looked the earl straight in the eye. “My name is Lucien,” he repeated, his tone implacable and determined. “Lucien. Not George or Hastings.”

“Damn it, boy, why do you persist with your gainsaying?” The Earl of St. Clare’s voice held a trace of pleading. “Can’t you see the likeness in the family portraits?”

Lucien grimaced. If he studied the portraits with one eye shut and the other squinted—certainly there were similarities. He replaced the figurine and stalked across a blue Persian rug to gaze out a window overlooking the courtyard.

The family and the faithful servants all backed up the Earl of St. Clare’s assertion, but the role didn’t feel right to Lucien. Living in the gloomy pile of rocks called Castle St. Clare made him edgy and apprehensive.

They were all mistaken.

He was not the Earl of St. Clare’s son.

The idea was laughable. Him—the long lost heir, Viscount Hastings. He didn’t recall any of the stories they told him of his childhood or growing up at the castle.

The study door flew open. Lucien spun around in a defensive stance, only relaxing when the honorable Charles Soulden bounded into the room. “Hastings…” He faltered when he intercepted Lucien’s glare. “I mean, Lucien! Your betrothed comes.”

“So I’m told.” Lucien sauntered toward Charles, his newly discovered cousin. “By all means, let us greet the woman brave enough to wed a man with no memory.”

***

The carriage swayed and bounced over the rutted road. With each successive pothole, the driver cursed more colorfully. Rosalind gripped a carriage strap, the excessive jolting doing nothing for her agitated nerves. At the completion of this journey, she would meet her betrothed for the first time. Questions pounded inside her head. Would he like her? And would he accept her, despite her…faults?

Her childhood friend and maidservant, Mary, pressed her nose to the carriage window. “Oh, miss! I think we’re almost there.”

Rosalind tensed. She forced a smile and bit back a cry of alarm when the carriage lurched. Grabbing the seat to avoid a tumble to the floor, she righted herself and slid along the seat to Mary. “Can you see Castle St. Clare?” She peered out the dusty window, attempting to see her future home.

A snarling gargoyle appeared inches from their faces. Rosalind’s breath escaped with a gasp.

Beside her, Mary screamed and jerked away from the window. “Miss Rosalind, do you think we should turn around and return to Stow-on-the-Wold?” She clutched Rosalind’s forearm, her voice rising to a squeak.

Mary’s dread, her frenetic thoughts of monsters, bombarded Rosalind and she shrugged from her maid’s grip to break the emotional connection.

“The earl is expecting us, Mary. We can’t go back.”

They sped past a rundown gatehouse, the carriage jolting from one pothole to the next. As they clattered through a stone gateway, Rosalind glimpsed the gargoyle’s twin. It leered from atop a stone wall and seemed alive, as if it could step from its granite prison on a whim.

The carriage made a sharp swing to the right, the coachman cursing his team of straining horses as the gradient increased sharply. The whip

cracked. Without warning, the interior of the carriage turned pitch black. Mary yelped, the shrill cry hurting her ears.

Rosalind swallowed her gasp, rearranged the skirts of her best blue riding habit trimmed in gold, and patted Mary on the arm. “It’s all right,” she soothed, yet the hand hidden in her skirts trembled. For a moment, the temptation to turn back teased at her, then she recalled the situation she’d return to—relations who resented her presence. The reality pushed aside her fears. Ugly gargoyles or not, she silently vowed to continue her journey.

An object scraped along the carriage sides, sending a shiver down her spine. Mary’s piercing shriek resounded within the confines of the enclosed space. Goose bumps rose on Rosalind’s arms. Her gaze whipped about the carriage. The noise repeated with an eerie echo.

“Hush, Mary.” Rosalind’s heart was pounding so loudly she could barely hear herself think. Mustering every shred of courage, she pressed her nose to the cold glass of the carriage window.

This was meant to be a grand adventure, her last opportunity to seize a secure future. Rosalind, the afflicted one, the one the people of Stow-on-the-Wold whispered would never catch a husband. The cousin destined to stay on the shelf. This was her chance to prove them all wrong, despite her accursed gift.

Leaves swept against the windows, followed by the same scraping sound. The cold knot of fear in her stomach twisted. A flash of ghostly fingers waved before her startled eyes. A branch. That was surely a branch. The fear clogging her throat lessened a fraction, and she relaxed against the plush cushions of the St. Clare coach with a tremulous sigh of relief.

“It’s a branch,” she said to Mary. “We’re driving along an avenue of trees. I fear they need trimming to let in the sunlight.”

“Are you sure, Miss Rosalind?”

“Of course I’m sure.” Rosalind made her voice firm and decisive. “Look out the window. You can make out the branches if you look hard enough.” As she spoke, the darkness in the carriage lifted. Then they were in daylight again. “There, what did I tell you?”

Mary grabbed her arm and tugged. Frantically. “Miss. Miss. Look!”

Rosalind swallowed. This was where she was to live? She studied the fortress perched atop the cliff like a menacing monolith. Built of stone, the castle appeared solid and strong enough to withstand the winds that howled

across the English Channel. Arrow slits glared at her like malignant eyes. Hardly the welcoming home she had envisioned.

"We're almost there. I can see the gate and the courtyard beyond." Mary turned, her eyes huge brown rounds in her freckled face. "There are people waiting to meet us."

Rosalind's hands crept up to check that her lacy cap sat straight. Uncertainties assailed her, threatening her fragile composure. Repeated swallowing did little to clear the lump in her throat. They said Hastings was mad. Perhaps she should have refused to marry him, but she'd promised her uncle, Sir John Chandler. He'd signed the papers when she and her cousin Miranda were babes. One of them had to marry Hastings. Miranda had flatly refused so it was up to Rosalind to fulfill family obligations. At least she'd have a home of her own. That was what she wanted, wasn't it? A home of her own, a husband and, if she was fortunate, lots of chubby, laughing babies.

Security.

"Whoa, there!" the coachman bellowed. A horse snorted. A harness jangled, and a piercing screech rent the air as the coachman hauled on the brake to halt the ponderous carriage.

The door flew open, and a footman dressed in green livery placed a step down for them to alight. Rosalind pushed aside her apprehension, swept up her skirts and placed her hand into the footman's to descend. She relinquished his aid almost instantly and stepped aside. Seconds later, Mary exited and stood beside her, blinking in the early afternoon sun.

The earl, much older than she recalled, bowed before her. Tall and thin with stooped shoulders, his clothing hung loosely while his powdered wig drew attention to his extreme pallor. "Rosalind, my dear, it is good to see you again."

Rosalind sank into a deep curtsey, her eyes modestly lowered to hide her sudden nervousness. Her betrothed was here, standing right behind his father, but she was too frightened to look. Her cousin's hysterical words rang through her mind. Viscount Hastings was an ogre. A beast.

The earl interrupted her panic. "Child, let me look at you." Rosalind straightened and met the frank gaze of the elderly earl. "You have the look of your grandmother."

She smiled. "Thank you, my lord. I count that a compliment indeed."

Certainly, her grandmother had been the one person who understood how she felt, since she suffered from the same family affliction. Rosalind had found the past three years since her grandmother's death both difficult and lonely.

The earl urged her forward. "Let me introduce you to my son and nephew. You will meet my sister, Lady Augusta, later."

A chill swept through Rosalind and her lashes lowered to screen her fears. The moment she had both anticipated and dreaded—the first meeting with her betrothed.

"Rosalind Chandler, may I present my son, Viscount Hastings, and my nephew, Charles Soulden?"

Viscount Hastings thrust out a hand, and Rosalind placed her trembling one in his, wishing she had remembered to pull on her gloves. It was too late to worry now. She sank into another curtsey, too nervous to meet his gaze. She registered his size first and then a number of erratic pictures flickered through her mind. She shoved them away, concentrating on the tangible man. He towered above her by a good ten inches, making her acutely aware of her own lack in that area.

The callused hand holding hers tightened, and Rosalind looked up, startled. Her breath caught when she saw her betrothed clearly. Clad in a somber black jacket and breeches, and as dark as she imagined the devil to be, he disdained the fashionable wigs and powder the other men wore. Instead, his hair tumbled in loose, disheveled curls about his head. His face was tanned, as if he spent many hours outside under the sun. But what really caught her attention was the angry scar that slashed his face, running from just below his left eye to his jaw. Puckered and red, it drew the eye.

Rosalind swallowed and looked away, but her gaze clashed with that of her betrothed before she could politely withdraw. His eyes were a mahogany brown, so dark they were almost black, and they openly mocked her nervous reaction.

Confusion and embarrassment fought within her. She tensed under his sardonic look. She'd known the viscount had suffered an injury while on a Grand Tour in Italy. The gossip about his miraculous return from the dead had spread rapidly through the ballrooms of London. Her stomach churned uneasily, and she averted her eyes to the weathered gray wall surrounding the courtyard.

“Rosalind, enchanted I’m sure.” Hastings’s low, gravely voice sent a surge of alarm through her veins.

She inclined her head and valiantly tried to hide her agitation, but she suspected few fooled Hastings. “Thank you, my lord.”

Sensations bombarded her mind, fragments of pictures, pieces of a larger puzzle. They were faint at the moment, but she knew from experience more details would come with time. A frustrated scream lodged in her throat. She tugged to free her hand, but he held fast. Why now? Why her betrothed? She’d thought—hoped—he would be one of the people for whom her accursed gift didn’t work. She’d felt nothing when she touched the Earl of St. Clare.

The picture of a woman formed in her mind. Dressed in a flowing white gown with a tumble of dark curls about her shoulders, she walked arm in arm with a man. The man was her betrothed, and the woman with him was heavy with child. Rosalind gasped. Her left hand clutched her skirt, and she yanked her right from his grasp. She fanned her face vigorously, fighting for control. “It is hot today.”

“Come inside,” the earl said. “You must be tired after your long journey.”

“Yes,” she said, still aware of the viscount’s mocking countenance. Her chin rose. “I am a little weary.”

“Allow me.” Hastings offered his arm. Rosalind caught the beaming smile on the earl’s face as he and Charles Soulden turned toward a flight of stairs leading inside the castle.

“It’s not too late to call off the wedding,” the viscount murmured.

Rosalind went cold inside at the rejection on his face. The gravel in the courtyard crunched underfoot—the only sound breaking the sudden hush between them.

If she backed out of this wedding, she’d be a laughingstock. A failure, and she’d have no home or chubby, laughing babies. She would end up on the shelf, a charity case depending on her uncle’s largesse. A shudder swept her at the thought of being prey to her waspish aunt again. No, she didn’t want that, which meant the wedding must go ahead.

Despite the fact that the man walking at her side was in love with another woman.

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Lucien studied the young woman chosen for him by the earl. Pretty enough, in a bland English way, but he'd need to be dumb and blind not to realize she feared him. She'd turned as pale as his white linen shirt when she noticed his scar. And she'd kept her gaze averted ever since, preferring to study the crumbling North Tower, the departure of the carriage, the stable lads scurrying about. She watched anything instead of him. Even now, her entire body shivered with nervous tension. If he made a loud noise, the woman would run, probably screaming, all the way back from whence she'd come.

Damn it, if he had to marry, he didn't want to marry a mouse. All he wanted was Francesca, and since she was dead, he couldn't have her. The familiar burning pain of loss seared through his chest. Francesca…

"No." Her voice was barely audible above the pain roaring through his mind. "I will marry you."

Surprise—nay, shock—made his brows shoot toward his hairline. With eyes narrowed, he turned to study her face. Damn, he'd missed the stubbornness in her small pointed chin. He cursed inwardly. At least no one could accuse him of marrying a copy of his deceased wife. Blond curls peeked from beneath the lady's lace cap, while pale blue eyes shied from his gaze. She was petite and totally dissimilar to Francesca's dark Junoesque beauty. He tried to imagine her in the marriage bed and failed dismally. Time to play his trump card. He continued with his lazy saunter, up a flight of stairs into the Great Hall with the English mouse at his side.

"They say I'm mad," he offered, observing her reaction.

"Y-yes." She stumbled at the final step.

Ah, the girl had heard but remained set on her course. "I have no memory of my past. Does that not disturb you?"

She said nothing, but Lucien found her transparent. The rumors bothered her. Then, without warning, her generous mouth firmed, her chin lifted defiantly, and her left hand screwed up into a fist, quickly hidden in her blue skirts.

She wasn't going to change her mind.

An unwilling surge of admiration filled him. He shoved it away. He wanted nothing to get in the way of his plan. Someone had ordered the killing of his beloved Francesca. That someone must pay, because not only had Francesca died on that dark night, but so had his unborn child. Vengeance would be his.

Lucien’s heart hardened. If Rosalind Chandler wanted marriage to Viscount Hastings, she would have it. After all, it mattered little. Nothing mattered except revenge.

Chapter Two

“Have you heard about the Throckmorton girl?” a woman in a dazzling yellow robe asked, her thin brows arching up in a way that guaranteed she’d garner an enthralled audience.

“Do tell,” the bejeweled gentleman opposite cried, his grin conspiratorial and eager.

Rosalind wanted to groan. It was the day after her arrival at St. Clare, and the dinner to introduce her to friends and neighbors was not turning out as she’d expected. There were so many furtive whispers from behind gloved hands and speculative stares from the gentlemen. Her spine stiffened. They were judging her…and finding her lacking.

“She’s not what I expected,” a young man whispered.

Rosalind glared down at her lap. Did they think she was deaf? She was beginning to feel like one of the prize-winning sheep from her uncle’s estate. She squirmed, eager for the meal to end.

“Stop fidgeting, girl.” The earl’s sister, Lady Augusta, punctuated her words with a narrow-eyed glare that made her freeze.

Rosalind battled straight-out rebellion. She glanced along the length of the table. Twenty were dining tonight, and she’d met most of them earlier. Neighbors. Family friends invited to witness the wedding nuptials. Four burly footmen dressed in the green St. Clare livery served with a calmness she admired, given that Lady Augusta scowled so ferociously. A profusion of candles illuminated the Royal Dining Room, creating shadows and reflecting in the sparkling glass and silverware. Rosalind wrinkled her nose at the myriad scents. The perfume from an urn of pink roses battled with the overpowering aroma of the gentleman seated opposite. Smiles and chatter abounded, grating on her nerves.

All the younger, more interesting guests sat at the other end, near Hastings and the Earl of St. Clare. She was firmly ensconced between Lady Augusta and her friend, Lady Pascoe. A part of her wondered if it was a

plot by Lady Augusta to assert her authority on the newcomer. No doubt, a subtle scheme to put her in her right and proper place.

Rosalind pushed a slice of stringy roast beef around her plate and wished the night was over, that the wedding was over and all the guests had left Castle St. Clare. A sharp prod of a mystery lump with her fork did little to disperse her resentment, so she scowled down the table at Hastings, but he never looked in her direction. To lull her agitation, she picked up her glass of French wine and stared into the depths of the ruby liquid, only to set it down again with a soft sigh.

Lady Pascoe laughed without warning. Rosalind glanced up in time to catch the speculative look in the older woman's eyes. "The gel won't survive the marriage bed," she declared. "Doesn't eat enough to keep a bird alive. Doesn't drink much either. Get some of that good smuggler's wine inside you, gel."

Heat stung Rosalind's cheeks when she intercepted the amused glances from those seated within hearing distance. She speared a morsel of jugged hare, placed it in her mouth, and chewed stoically.

"Enough, Elizabeth," Lady Augusta snapped. "That's hardly a proper topic for dinner conversation."

"It's true." Lady Pascoe directed a query farther down the table. "What do you say, Charles? This latest batch of wine from the smugglers should build the gel's strength."

Her rusty cackle set Rosalind's nerves even more on edge. The pounding in her head intensified, and she gave up all pretence of eating.

A feminine titter at the other end of the table made her wince. It was bad enough that Lady Pascoe shouted loud enough for those in the neighboring village to heed, but for Lady Sophia, daughter of the Earl of Radford, to hear and giggle was beyond embarrassing. Rosalind studied them furtively. The tilt of Lady Sophia's head as she fluttered her eyelashes at Hastings made it obvious she was avoiding direct eye contact with his scar. Despite her coquettish behavior, the imperfection bothered her. Lady Sophia placed her hand on Hastings's arm. Rosalind's eyes narrowed at the familiar action. That was her betrothed Lady Sophia was flirting with.

Rosalind bit back a nasty word, one she'd overheard the coachman use during the journey to St. Clare. Naively, she'd presumed her betrothal would be a time of celebration, of giddy happiness. Not for an instant had she thought her betrothed would ignore her or suggest she cry off. She

shuddered inwardly at the idea of returning to live with her uncle and aunt. No, it was unthinkable.

Dinner continued. The footmen removed the tablecloth to serve dessert.

Finally the meal ended and Lady Augusta stood. “We will leave the men to their port and pipes.”

Rosalind trailed after the rest of the women as they wandered through to the Chinese Drawing Room. She chose an upright chair, as far away from the roaring fire as she could, and tried to look inconspicuous. Lady Augusta waited for the ladies to settle before glancing around the expectant faces. “Rosalind, you may entertain us while I pour tea.”

Rosalind wanted to refuse. She hated to play the harpsichord and always had. She hesitated, hoping one of the other women would offer, releasing her from obligation.

But Lady Pascoe shooed her toward the harpsichord. “Go on, gel. Play. Something lively. Augusta, I hope you purchased some tea from the latest shipment. The last lot you served tasted like straw dipped in water.”

Several of the ladies tittered, and Lady Augusta’s gloved hand tightened around the teapot.

“I serve nothing but the best at Castle St. Clare,” Lady Augusta said in an icy tone. “Rosalind, music, if you please.”

Bowing to the inevitable, she settled behind the harpsichord, drew off her gloves and cast them aside. At least they hadn’t demanded she sing. Rosalind forced her lips to smile and arranged her cream skirts before running her hands over the keys. About one third of the way through the Bach hymn, she hit the wrong note.

A flurry of whispers erupted. Rosalind bit her bottom lip and looked up to see Lady Sophia snicker behind her fan. She immediately struck another discordant note. Her heart leaped as mortified color gathered in her cheeks. Somehow, she fumbled her way through the rest of the hymn, coming to a crashing halt as the men filed into the drawing room to join them.

“Thank you,” Lady Augusta said. “Lady Sophia, perhaps you would care to take over?”

Rosalind slid off the stool and escaped toward the open terrace doors that led out to the formal gardens at the rear of the castle. A quick glance confirmed no one would miss her, and she stepped outside.

The sky glowed softly, the color of deep blue, almost black silk, neither day nor night but the time in between. Rosalind inhaled and detected a hint

of salt in the air. When she passed the North Tower, the muted surge of the waves became audible. She followed a gravel path, lit at intervals by torches, and savored the peace after the stuffiness and loud chatter in the dining room.

As she rounded the sweeping curve of the path, Rosalind paused to trail her hand over the foliage of a leafy green hedge. A pungent aroma, peppery and spicy, rose when her fingers crushed a leaf, and she realized she'd left her gloves inside by the harpsichord.

"There you are. What kept you?" a harsh voice demanded.

Rosalind froze at the sound of voices coming from the other side of the hedge.

"I had to wait for the courier, Hawk. He said to tell you the shipment's due tomorrow night. On the tide."

"About time," the man who appeared to be in charge growled. "Notify the men. We meet an hour before the tide. Go now, before someone sees you."

Smugglers? Not unusual in these times. Lady Pascoe had alluded to their presence at dinner. But even so, Rosalind instinctively hid, pressing against the foliage, despite the branches jabbing through her silk gown. It wouldn't do for them to catch her eavesdropping. Most people ignored smuggler operations since their presence benefited everyone from villagers to the titled, but Rosalind had heard tales of the gangs farther down the coast—stories of murder and brutality.

Stealthy footsteps passed a few feet away from her while the other man left in the opposite direction via the gardens. When she could no longer hear the firm footsteps, her alarm eased and the tension left her shoulders. She edged from hiding. It was time for her to return to the drawing room and Hastings. She turned to retrace her steps and came to an abrupt halt, her nose flattened against a solid chest. The air hissed from her lungs, and a startled squeak escaped. She wobbled and strong hands shot out to grasp her upper arms.

"What are you doing out here alone?"

The husky growl made her stomach lurch. Had it been Hastings she'd overheard? Rosalind stiffened with defiance before raising her gaze to meet her betrothed's frowning visage. "I needed some air," she murmured.

His bare hands sent a tingle racing up her arm. Rosalind wanted to move away, to free herself of this strange sensation, yet contrarily she

wanted to move closer to inhale the spicy, sweet scent of tobacco that had permeated his clothes. She felt a flush bloom on her cheeks at the thought.

"You shouldn't be out here alone."

"Why?" Was it because he was worried she might have seen something? "This is my home now." The heat in her cheeks intensified, and she hoped he wouldn't notice her unease. "After tomorrow," she added hastily.

His grip on her arms tightened. "It's not too late to change your mind."

"I beg your pardon?" Questions whirled through her mind, and not one possible answer presented a glimmer of understanding. This was the second time he'd asked if she wanted to call off the marriage. Why was he so insistent?

"Now is the time to change your mind." The strain in his voice made her stare. "I can't make you happy."

Rosalind tugged from his touch while she struggled to control the panic sizzling through her veins. She wanted to get married. She wanted a husband.

Security.

Children.

And since the men of marriageable age in Stow-on-the-Wold and the surrounding district thought she was a witch, Hastings was her very last chance.

She didn't expect love, but surely friendship wasn't too much to ask? "I want to marry you," she said, ignoring for the moment the conversation she'd overheard earlier.

They stared at each other. Rosalind's heart raced, but she refused to look away before her betrothed.

Hastings cracked first. "So be it," he ground out. "Don't say you weren't warned." He took possession of her arm and propelled her toward the drawing room.

Rosalind hurried to keep pace with his longer stride and finally dug in her heels, forcing him to stop by a rose bed. "Warned about what? I don't understand."

In the light that spilled from the drawing room, she saw the tightening of his mouth, the slash of the scar down his cheek. The warmth of his hand heated her own and, without warning, a picture formed in her mind. Rosalind stiffened, felt her eyes widen.

It was the woman again. Heavy with child and bearing a broad smile, she skipped, happy and carefree along the edge of a stream. Rosalind's insides churned with sudden fear, but the vision remained despite trying to block her betrothed's thoughts. Her skin felt hot, and her clothes clung to her clammy body. She cast a quick glance at Hastings.

"What?" he demanded.

"Nothing!" She swallowed, trying to disengage from him without being too obvious. No one must learn of her accursed gift. She didn't want tales of witchcraft to find her here at Castle St. Clare. For once she wanted an ordinary life, to feel the same as others. Mary knew of her gift, but she was the only one. It must remain that way. If Hastings discovered she had the sight, he might call off the marriage. Panic made her voice sharp. "It's nothing. A touch of indigestion."

Hastings snatched up her hand and, in her mind, Rosalind saw a couple dancing beneath the stars, a full moon hanging low in the sky. She bit back a soft moan of distress. The couple was in love. It was obvious in the way the man held the woman, the soft smile on his face when he gazed at her.

Questions trembled at the tip of her tongue, but one look at his face made her choke them back. Dark and unapproachable. Brooding. His expression did nothing to encourage chitchat.

The wedding would take place tomorrow. Rosalind couldn't call it off. She wouldn't. She refused, despite his rebuff.

Rosalind glanced at her betrothed's face then down at the ground. Tears stung her eyes and she bit her bottom lip.

How could she marry this man knowing his thoughts were for another?

How could she not?

***

"Good morning, Miss Rosalind." Mary's voice sounded seconds before she whipped back the damask curtains screening the bed.

Morning? Already? Rosalind groaned softly in fatigue, not ready to rise from the comfort of the feather mattress. Not even for the enticing scent of hot chocolate wafting from the pot Mary had placed on the walnut dresser. She yanked the covers over her head and squeezed her eyes shut. It was dark under the covers, but not distracting enough to keep the shadows in her mind at bay.

Today was the day.

Her wedding day.

Confusion had tied her stomach in knots, keeping her awake, twisting and turning late into the night. The fault of new surroundings, she tried to tell herself. Yet that wasn't the whole truth. For despite the wail of the wind and the rap of a loose shutter throughout the night, the specter that preyed on her mind was that of the dark-haired man to whom she was betrothed.

The enigma—the man called George St. Clare, Viscount Hastings, or the name he answered to, Lucien—and the man who privately spurned her.

"It's time for you to prepare for the wedding, miss."

"I'm tired," Rosalind muttered, struggling to sit.

"Oh, miss! I'm not surprised. Did you hear all the strange noises last night? Ghosts, I reckon. The other maids said people sometimes search for the long-lost St. Clare treasure. The ghosts haunt the castle to scare everyone away." Her voice held distinct relish. A tiny shudder of delighted horror rippled down her body. "Or it could be smugglers. I hear they employ many of the village men." Mary cocked her head and pursed her lips in a considering manner. "The noises be like chains rattling and moans. Lots of moans." She shuddered again, her gaze darting to all four corners of the chamber. "No, miss. I'm sure it was ghosts."

"It was the wind. There are no ghosts in this castle." Rosalind swung her legs over the edge of the bed and slithered down until her feet touched the ground. Mary had a terrible penchant for gossip. Treasure! Rosalind didn't believe the stories of ghosts and treasure for a moment. "I suppose I'd better get ready."

"I can't find your hairbrush. Have you seen it?"

"It will be here somewhere." Rosalind smothered a yawn.

Her wedding day. Fear danced down her spine as she slid her arms into the robe Mary held for her. She'd be glad when the ceremony was over and she was safely married.

"Are you still worrying about the marriage bed?"

Rosalind grimaced. "I am now. Thank you for reminding me." As if she didn't have enough to worry about. Her betrothed hated her and now it seemed he was a smuggler. Add the mysteries of the marriage bed her aunt had described in most confusing terms, then yes, she had plenty to worry on.

For years she'd looked forward to this day. Yet, now her wedding day was upon her, she felt like a lamb being driven to Smithfield's market for slaughter.

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The dainty Englishwoman looked as if she might faint. She appeared so fragile that if a gust of wind picked up, she'd take flight. There wasn't much to her that Lucien could see, apart from her eyes. Her big blue eyes reminded him of the lakes near his home in Italy.

Lucien frowned and concentrated on the drone of the vicar. How much more would he deem fit to say? He wished the whole procedure was over so his life would return to normal, as normal as it could be without Francesca. No more dinner parties. No more dinner guests. He needed peace and privacy to investigate. His hands fisted at his sides, his muscles tense. The Englishman who'd sent men to murder them during their journey from Italy to St. Clare had a name, and he wanted it.

He wanted to know why.

An edgy agitation assailed him when he thought of his wife. Francesca. His tight jaw relaxed as he recalled her laugh, her love of life. The way she'd loved him, and the way she showed her love. His loins tightened and he stirred restlessly, remembering too late she was gone.

Murdered.

And he was no closer to finding the person responsible for the despicable deed.

The vicar cleared his throat, and Lucien snapped to attention. When the vicar repeated the words, Lucien swallowed before uttering a reply. Damn it! How could he pledge to this woman when he hated the very idea? Frustration warred with necessity. How could he not? As long as everyone assumed he was Viscount Hastings, he was trapped into this marriage. For without his cover here at Castle St. Clare, he had no hope of finding the elusive Hawk, his main suspect in Francesca's murder.

A loud cough echoed in the chapel. The vicar's eyes beseeched Lucien to act. Behind him, feet shuffled, skirts rustled. He closed his eyes briefly and acknowledged the question in a clear, firm voice. "I do."

Minutes later, it was over.

Lucien was married to the colorless woman at his side.

***

Rosalind huddled under the covers, the flowered damask hangings drawn about the bed creating a private haven, while she considered the length of time that had elapsed since she'd retired. It seemed ages since Mary had helped her change from her bridal finery into her nightgown. When would her husband appear?

A series of assorted creaks and thumps sounded in the passage outside her room. Settling noises, she assured herself. The foreign sounds were nothing unusual at all. The scurry of tiny feet across the floor made Rosalind bolt upright. *Not mice!* She detested the gray rodents.

A door squeaked, and Rosalind stiffened. He had arrived at last. She strained to hear footsteps, her heart thumping with both anticipation and fear of the unknown. She heard a soft sound that might have been a footstep, then nothing. Possibly the fine Persian carpet muted further sounds. Her heart thumped so noisily she thought Hastings would hear it. A deep, hurried breath did little to ease her anxiety.

Finally, tired of the strain, she called out, "Hello?" The distinct wobble in her voice brought a frown. She sounded frightened and that wouldn't do at all. Experience with her gift had taught her that no matter what the situation, a brave façade worked wonders. "Is someone there?"

There was no reply, but every one of her senses shrieked of a presence in her chamber. She chewed on her bottom lip and wondered how to proceed. Instinct told her if Hastings was in her chamber, he'd answer her greeting and not skulk like…like a mouse.

Rosalind slid toward the join in the damask hangings. With one hand, she inched the curtains apart and peered intently into the darkness.

To her intense frustration, the locked shutters made her room black as chimney soot. Yet she knew someone was inside the room with her. Listening attentively for the slightest sound, she slid one leg over the edge of the bed. The salty tang of the sea was normal if the windows were open, but not the sweet whiff of tobacco. She half stood before a sound behind her made fear surge.

She whirled about, her leg tangling with the bedcovers. A sharp nudge in the middle of her back propelled her forward again. Empty air met her frantic hands. Her head clipped the corner of the four-poster bed, then collided with the unforgiving floor. Pinpricks of pain stabbed her temples.

In the distance, a clock chimed the hour. The floorboards creaked behind her.

Footsteps. Rosalind struggled to lift her head, to focus. Dizziness made the room whirl. She whimpered softly, then surrendered to the dark.

***

"Miss! Miss Rosalind!"

The high, sharp tones pierced Rosalind's stupor. Vigorous shaking did the rest, bringing her to full wakefulness.

"Stop shaking me," she protested. "Before you do some damage."

"What happened, Miss Rosalind?"

Rosalind paused to think, but there was a yawning hole in her memory. She had no idea how she came to be on the floor. She struggled to a sitting position.

Mary hastened to help. "Did you have a nightmare?"

"I don't think so." White-hot pain sliced through her head. A grimace twisted her lips. She remembered the wedding and the celebration afterward. She recalled waiting for Hastings. Then…

Then nothing.

She clambered to her feet and wobbled slightly before Mary grabbed her and aided her to a chair.

"My head hurts," she said, trying not to dwell on her husband's failure to appear. Her mind refused to cooperate and she frowned. She hadn't done anything wrong, had she?

"Let me see." Mary's hands moved over her head. When she touched the side of her head, above her ear, Rosalind winced. "You have a lump on your head, Miss Rosalind. Would you like a headache powder? There's no need for you to go down to breakfast. Not this morn."

The knowing look on Mary's face made Rosalind squirm. Did she suspect Hastings hadn't consummated the marriage? All the more reason to break her fast with the others. And pretend this marriage was normal.

The hour appeared advanced. She would explore the gardens, the castle and acquaint herself with her new home. She experienced a gamut of perplexing emotions as her mind returned to her absent husband. Maybe she'd summon the courage to corner Hastings and demand answers.

"I feel better now, Mary. I'd enjoy a walk after breakfast."

“Too much fresh air is not good for a body.” Mary folded her arms across her ample bosom.

“Rubbish. I enjoy walking. I’ve wanted to explore the beach ever since I arrived.”

“Stay away from the sea water. You’ll take a chill, especially after falling from bed and hitting your head.”

Rosalind’s eyes narrowed. “I did not fall out of bed. You make me sound like a child.” A whisper of a memory flitted through her mind, and she seized it. One hand crept to test a painful spot in the middle of her back. Yes! Someone had pushed her. She was sure of it.

“How did you come to be on the floor, if you didn’t fall from your bed?”

She doubted Mary would believe her. “Can you help me dress now, please?”

“Only if you eat first. I’ll bring hot chocolate and spice cakes before I help you dress.” Mary yanked back the bed covers and patted the bed. “Back into bed with you.”

Rosalind’s mouth firmed, but she climbed back into bed as instructed. The minute Mary left, she clambered back out and ignored the throb in her head to dress. After a brisk wash, she chose a dark blue open robe with a matching petticoat, pulled on shoes, and tugged a cloak from her wooden chest.

Halfway to the door, Rosalind realized she’d neglected to tidy her hair. She spun back to her dresser and snatched up her hairbrush.

“Ouch,” she muttered, then stilled. Her hairbrush. It hadn’t been there when she went to bed.

The back of her neck prickled. She whirled about, her gaze piercing every corner. The shutters were open now. Light streamed into the room, highlighting the feminine fripperies, the jewel-colored tapestries of Diana the huntress, and the Persian carpet. She exhaled sharply. It was the knock on her head—definitely the knock on her head, that and an overactive imagination. There was no one present in the chamber except her.

She grabbed her gloves and left, heading down a lengthy corridor and turning right at the end. She navigated her way by counting doorways. As she hurried to the breakfast room, her shoes rapped on the wooden floors, echoing noisily. Portraits of long-forgotten ancestors frowned down from the walls. She shot an uneasy glance over her shoulder.

No, she was alone, yet her disquiet persisted.

Ridiculous, she thought, and slowed, determined to prove there was nothing to be frightened of. There were no ghosts or specters with clanking chains and eerie wails, and although she'd heard mice, she'd yet to see one.

She studied a tarnished old suit of armor standing against the wall and scanned the portrait of a woman who looked uncannily like Lady Augusta.

A cough rattled noisily in a throat behind her, and Rosalind almost parted company with her shoes. She spun, her hand trembling at her breast, icy fear galloping through her veins until she focused and recognized the earl.

"Rosalind, child. What are you doing skulking in the passage?"

"Ah…" Did he know about her failure with her husband? Heat suffused her cheeks and, unable to bear pity or sympathy, she rushed into speech. "Good morning. I wanted to explore."

"Plenty of time for that later." The earl offered his arm. "I expect you would like breakfast."

"Yes." Rosalind doubted food would sit easily in her stomach but refrained from mentioning it because she didn't want to raise embarrassing questions.

"In you go." The earl propelled her toward the breakfast room. "I need to speak with my secretary for a moment."

At the doorway, her steps faltered. The only other occupant was Hastings. She hesitated, her bravado from earlier vanishing as she studied the man she'd married the day before. He was huge. He towered over the earl and made her feel small and insignificant.

She couldn't stay out here all day. He was her husband. Determined to show poise, Rosalind forced herself to step inside the breakfast room. She had questions to ask. Had he entered her room earlier? Had he pushed her from her bed? Did he wish her ill?

She stepped closer. "Good morning."

Hastings's face was expressionless, his glance indifferent. Rosalind's confidence plunged as every one of her questions tangled together like a ball of twine. A flicker of anxiety pierced her as she stared helplessly at her husband who wasn't a husband. Where did she start?

He'd tied his long hair back this morning, accentuating his dark eyes, his unfashionable tan and scar. His one glance sliced right through her, sensitizing her body and making her aware of the way her stays laced across

her breasts. A pain in her chest reminded her to breathe. She wished he'd say something. Anything.

But his face remained impassive and his gaze swept her from head to foot. He stood and turned, the light streaming into the breakfast room highlighting his scar with merciless attention to the jagged detail. He prowled to the chair at the far end of the table and pulled it out. One brow arched as he indicated silently she should sit.

Rosalind walked toward him with caution. For an instant, her mind screamed to run, but she continued her approach until she stood before him.

He seated her with brisk efficiency, but didn't speak or touch her in any way. Her throat clogged with a knot of apprehension, the humiliation of his spurning. She swallowed rapidly and sucked in a deep breath. His sandalwood scent and a more subtle masculine note made her insides jolt with uneasy awareness. This was her husband.

"Thank you," she murmured, her questions whirring through her mind at breakneck speed. Now if only she could find the courage to state them out loud without fear of mangling her words. She cleared her throat. "I—"

Hastings nodded, a hurried impersonal nod of farewell, and strode from the room without a word.

Rosalind's mouth dropped open. She stared after him, a sharp pain jabbing her heart. Tears pricked at her eyes, and her headache returned with vengeance.

Hastings was her husband, but he acted as though he hated her.

Chapter Three

Rosalind poured chocolate into a dainty porcelain cup and stared at the swirls in the dark liquid. A sigh that was almost a sob escaped. The sound seemed to hang in the breakfast room before it faded to nothing. She bit her bottom lip; she swallowed. Steam drifted off the chocolate. She reached out to pick up her cup, but her hand shook so badly she gave up. Instead, she stared in the direction Hastings had disappeared.

Alone.

She'd never felt so isolated in all her life, not even when her grandmother had died. Nothing had prepared her for this situation. Nothing.

She swiped away a bothersome tear with the back of her hand. When the slap-slap of footsteps heralded an arrival, she snatched up a napkin and rapidly dabbed her eyes. Then she reached for her chocolate and hoped she wouldn't spill it.

"There you be, miss." Exasperation colored Mary's terse words. "I've searched everywhere for you. There be too many rooms in this pile of stones."

"I decided to come down for breakfast." Rosalind fixed her attention on her chocolate again, feeling the full weight of Mary's disapproval. *Don't cry.* She stared so hard her eyes ached. Thank goodness it was Mary and not the earl or Charles—or even worse, Lady Augusta. Maybe Mary wouldn't notice the tears and interrogate her, because she had no intention of discussing her marriage. Her feelings for Hastings were personal. Private.

Mary stomped up to the table and planted her hands firmly on her rounded hips. "You be acting like a child. You might have told me before I hiked to the kitchens and back."

Rosalind's mouth firmed, but she admitted to her poor behavior. It was only right. "I'm sorry, Mary. Would you like to go for a walk?" It was an apology, but a double-edged one. Mary hated walking.

Her maid huffed. "I'll fetch your cloak. It be cold outdoors."

"You're coming with me?"

“I don’t like this pile of stones.” Mary glanced over her shoulder as if she expected someone to leap out at her. “A body be much safer outdoors.”

Rosalind gaped. Her maid habitually wore a grin while her eyes sparkled with life. This doom and gloom was an uncharacteristic change. Mary departed before she could form a question, leaving her alone with her puzzlement. At the first opportunity she’d ask Mary what she meant.

Five minutes later, wrapped warmly against the biting wind, they walked past the crumbling North Tower. Ivy covered the part still standing, the green leaves a bright contrast to the weathered gray stone.

Rosalind slowed. “Have you heard anything about the tower?”

“Aye.” Mary grabbed Rosalind’s arm and forced her to walk faster. She darted a glance over her shoulder and made the sign of a cross with her free hand. “It be haunted.”

Doubt made Rosalind frown again, but curiosity overcame her. “By whom?”

“A St. Clare ancestor. Lady Margaret. They say her betrothed ran off with another. Went mad, she did. Retired to the North Tower and never came out.”

“Hmmm.”

“The maids have heard her. They say her screams foretell bad luck. Of a death to come.” Mary shifted uneasily. “She screamed last night.”

Rosalind studied the decaying tower for a brief moment then jerked her gaze away. There were enough strange noises and unexplained happenings at Castle St. Clare without letting Mary fill her head with more nonsense. “Make haste, Mary. I want to leave before Lady Augusta catches me.”

“This be a fearsome place,” Mary declared, seeming to read her mind and sense her disquiet. “Ghosts, strange noises and the sort.”

They walked through the gate and Rosalind glanced up. The spikes of the portcullis glinted, dangerous and as deadly as the day of their installation. She shuddered at the thought of the spikes piercing her skin, spearing through body and crushing limbs, and hastened her steps to a path that ran along the cliff.

Mary was right about one thing. There was something strange about Castle St. Clare. And Hastings seemed right in the thick of the mystery. A flicker of apprehension swept through her, leaving a nasty taste in her mouth. He looked sinister at times, especially if the sun caught his face at

the right angle, but surely he didn't mean her harm? A breath clogged her throat. No, she refused to believe it.

But someone had skulked in her chamber this morning. Someone had pushed her from bed. Someone intended to harm her…

The path tapered, becoming too narrow for both of them to walk abreast. Rosalind strode ahead, in a most unladylike manner, trying to outdistance her turbulent thoughts.

"Miss Rosalind, slow down. *Please.*" Mary's plaintive gasp, interspersed with wheezy pants, made her slow. One glimpse of her maid's red cheeks and the guilt was instantaneous.

"Oh, Mary. I'm sorry. How thoughtless of me. I'm bad company today, I fear."

"Probably the knock on your noggin this morning."

Rosalind wanted to smile. Mary's motivation was clear. She intended to save Rosalind from herself no matter the consequences. "Are you recovered enough to continue walking?"

Mary groaned and rolled her eyes. "Yes, miss. As long as you don't turn our walk into a race."

They continued along the cliff top, but at a much slower pace. Rosalind led the way, navigating a collapsed stone wall that littered the path, skirting the lethal branches of a thorny hedge until she came to an open space in the undergrowth. They could turn toward a copse of trees to their right or continue along the cliff path. They'd walked far enough that Castle St. Clare was no longer visible, obscured by trees, the hedge and a jutting outcrop of pale limestone. She smiled, feeling happy for the first time since she'd woken on the floor this morning.

The view of the sea stretched as far as the eye could see, and it was as beautiful as her grandmother had described. Shades of blue and green and gray with frothy white tops on the waves made her itch to paint the scene. Not that her talents would do the panorama justice. Rosalind paused to look down. The sea churned and tossed, waves crashing to shore and thrashing against the base of the cliff in a thunderous finale. She turned to beam at Mary. "Look, it's beautiful."

"It's cold." Mary stopped beside Rosalind and huddled into her woolen cloak. She stared off into the distance then grinned cheekily. "Viscount Hastings, he's coming this way. Probably to meet you."

Rosalind whirled in the direction Mary indicated, the wind whipping her curls across her face. She brushed an errant lock from her eyes and watched Hastings approach on horseback, her heart lurching with sudden alarm.

"I will return to the castle on my own," Mary said.

"No!" Rosalind grabbed Mary's forearm. "Don't leave me."

Mary's ginger brows shot up. "But he's your husband."

"No, I…"

Mary's grin brought a hot flush to her face.

The thud of hooves made them both turn. Hastings towered over them, moving as one with his mount. Mary sketched a brief curtsey while Rosalind merely stared up at her husband, her stomach fluttering with nerves. Her gaze danced across his face, taking in his scar before moving up to meet his eyes. The mocking cynicism and underlying pain wrenched her gaze away. It took a few brief seconds to focus, to look back at the man she was married to, but by then the damage had occurred. An indifferent mask covered his emotions.

The black horse skittered at the raucous cry of a seagull. Hastings held the animal firmly in check with a quiet word and a soothing pat on its glossy neck. He treated his horse with more consideration than her. The fact rankled.

He turned his attention to her again. "You shouldn't be here."

Rosalind glanced about for Mary, but saw only a flash of brown as Mary disappeared down the path toward the castle. The traitor. Make no mistake, she would have words with her later.

The horse shifted again, jerking her attention back to the man sitting atop the beast, reminding her of his edict. His highhandedness. "Why?"

"The cliff top is unstable in places. It's dangerous."

He'd spoken directly to her! Rosalind sniffed. "I want to walk on the beach." Bother. Now she sounded like a sulky child.

Hastings frowned, but he stared out to sea instead of looking at her. "You shouldn't be alone, especially down in the cove."

"I wasn't," Rosalind snapped. He couldn't bear to look her in the face. Hands curled to fists at her side, she burned to spit out angry words—words to wound as he'd wounded her. For an even-tempered person, she was finding it difficult to remain calm. Why wouldn't he look at her? She knew

she was no beauty, not like her cousin, Miranda, but she was by no means ugly or ill formed.

Counseling patience and feminine serenity, Rosalind silently counted to five. It wouldn't hurt her to try for politeness, especially if her attempt broke the strained, chilly atmosphere between them. "Thank you for warning me of the danger. I'll make sure I keep well back from the edge."

There. He'd warned her, and she'd acknowledged the danger. That should be an end of it. Rosalind stepped off the path to give horse and rider room to move away. When they remained, she edged past, determined to continue her exploring. She was used to walking her uncle's estate. No harm would befall her out here. At the thought of danger, her hand crept up to finger the bump on her head. Inside Castle St. Clare, however, was another matter.

Lucien frowned at the English mouse sauntering away. His wife, he corrected himself. Oberon shifted uneasily beneath him, and he absently soothed his mount. The firm set of her mouth told him she was hell-bent on going down to the cove. And that was dangerous—too dangerous. Only last night, he'd witnessed smugglers landing cargo in the cove.

He cursed under his breath. God knows what the smugglers had hidden in the caves that ran inland from the cove. They wouldn't take kindly to people nosing about if they used the caves for storage. He frowned, not happy with the smuggler situation but knowing that many of the villagers relied on the income to make ends meet. They would suffer if he stamped his authority on the situation, and he couldn't allow that. Until he had alternative methods of raising funds, the smugglers stayed. With the support they received from the local aristocracy, he'd have a battle to remove them anyway.

There was no choice.

He didn't want to escort her.

His gaze skittered down her back to the feminine sway of her hips, the flash of a stocking-clad ankle.

Cursing inwardly, he leaped off Oberon and hurried after the woman, leading his horse behind him. "Wait!" He grabbed her upper arm with his free hand and spun her around to face him.

Her chin jerked up and her pale blue eyes dared him to exert further force. "I'll be careful, you can be sure. I don't require watching like a

child.” She enunciated carefully. Precisely. Her brows shot up, and she directed her gaze to his hand.

“I’ll show you the path down to the beach.” Lucien released her and paused, shocked. That was not what he’d meant to say. He’d meant to order her to return home. “It’s not safe to wander on your own here. Take a footman next time or one of the stable lads.”

“I’m used to wandering the estate at home. At will.”

“This is your home now.” Lucien narrowed his eyes, and the scar on his cheek pulled as his facial muscles tensed. Francesca would have laughed and made him laugh in return until she got her own way. Pain lanced through his mind, pulsated in the region of his heart. “You will obey. Take a footman on your outings or you’ll stay at the castle.”

The woman glared at him. Her light eyes darkened with an inner fire that underlined the stubbornness of her chin. Under her cloak, he saw the subtle rise and fall of her breasts. When he realized where he was looking, he stiffened. He jerked his gaze to her face and clenched his jaw while he waited for her decision. “Well?” he demanded, not bothering to hide his irritation.

Their eyes met and held in a silent duel, but finally she gave him a grudging nod. “I’ll take a footman.”

Lucien let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. Despite her compliance, he sensed she wanted to tell him to go to the devil. His mouth twisted. Hell, she was too late. He was already there.

“Come.” He gestured for her to precede him down the path and made a clicking sound to urge Oberon to walk on behind him.

They picked their way down the debris-strewn path, an uneasy silence between them. Lucien’s thoughts drifted to Francesca.

His search for Hawk was taking longer than he’d envisaged. Each whisper from the village of St. Clare made hope surge, but the man was proving wily and managed to slip through his fingers. The man remained one step ahead all the time. Lucien let out a frustrated sigh.

Without warning, the woman stopped in the middle of the track and turned to face him. “Why don’t you like me? What have I done to deserve such dislike? You didn’t even come to my room last night.”

Lucien felt his mouth drop. He picked it up so rapidly his teeth clicked together. He was her husband. How dare she question him? Only one other woman had ever pushed him this way…

He reined in his temper and waited for the tight sensation in his chest to dissipate.

“I know you don’t like me. You can hardly deny it.”

Lucien snorted. If she thought marriages took place for anything other than necessity, she was a fool. “Like” was not an essential ingredient where marriage was concerned. The woman glared at him again. And the way her hands fisted, he was sure her fingernails were digging painfully into her flesh.

“You didn’t let me finish,” she snapped, her eyes turning the same deep, unfathomable blue they had earlier. “Can’t we try to be friends?”

A cynical laugh escaped before Lucien could censor his reaction.

He had loved before.

And lost.

But that didn’t mean he owed his new wife an explanation. “As you wish.” He offered a curt bow. As much as he desired her gone, he couldn’t avoid the woman. It would be best for everyone if they at least appeared civil during their interactions.

“It can’t be that dangerous down in the cove,” the woman said without warning. “Someone else is down there.”

Lucien jolted to full attention. He scanned the seashore to no avail. “Where?”

“To the right of the big boulder, the one jutting out into the sea.”

He caught a blur of movement before the figure disappeared from sight. Odd. The villagers didn’t usually visit this cove. Lucien presumed it was because of the smugglers, but the lack of visitors could be rooted in superstition. Charles had spoken of a shipwreck not far from the castle during the last century. He’d mentioned tales of ghouls guarding a mystery treasure. Lucien scoffed at the romantic notion. It was more likely a story put about by smugglers to ensure privacy. This made the man’s presence suspicious, and he needed to question him for a possible lead in his investigation.

The information he’d turned up on Hawk was pitifully sparse. One of the whispers that particularly interested him connected the mysterious Hawk with the smugglers. Lucien had questioned a young shepherd, and the boy had blurted out that the smugglers had a new leader, a mystery man who wore a mask and spoke with the voice of the devil.

Charles had also mentioned an old hermit who lived in a cave farther down the coast. The man's only living son had died in a confrontation with excise men and he'd retreated to suffer his grief alone. Lucien intended to question him about the mystery man who'd taken over the smuggler gang. Someone must know where the new leader had come from and his real identity. Gossip was inevitable in a village of this size. The man must have enemies, a scorned lover—someone who was willing to reveal his name.

Lucien hesitated, wanting to storm the cove and demand answers. But he couldn't leave the woman alone without protection. Frustration spiked inside him. Hellfire. She would get in the way when a chance presented itself.

A quick glance spoke of her determination to go down to the beach. The up-tilted chin, the firm lips and the steady gaze signaled her intentions clearly without the need for words. His shoulders slumped, admitting defeat. "Come then."

The woman looked at him, her blond brows arching.

Lucien felt a slight heat in his cheeks and scowled to counteract the sensation. "I have estate business this afternoon. We must make haste."

"It's mid-morning."

Now he felt beleaguered and petty. It was the calm look on her face, the steady, candid gaze in those cool blue eyes and her damn eyebrows. They spoke a language all of their own.

From the corner of his eye, he caught a flash of movement in the cove. Reminded of his mission, he narrowed his eyes in concentration.

When he held his dying Francesca in his arms, he'd promised her he'd retaliate and avenge her death. He intended to honor the pledge. The second part of the promise, unwillingly given to ease her passage into death—undertaking to seek love again—he shoved aside as he turned to the English mouse.

"If you want to go, we'll have to go now." Lucien turned to his mount and made a clicking sound behind his teeth. Oberon trotted obediently behind him, leaving the woman to follow. Every one of his senses sprang to life. Lucien gritted his teeth. Without looking, he knew the woman was frowning. Too bad. If she didn't like it, she was welcome to leave. His stride lengthened as he increased the pace, heading toward the dead oak and the marker where the path split. He stalked along the right fork, leading down to the cove.

The wind whipped over the edge of the cliff, pulling at his hair. The distinctive tang of salt carried on the wind, and a vision of young boys playing in the sea flickered through his mind. A smile tugged his lips, but the instant he seized the memory, his mind locked up, refusing to release the slice of his past. He had no idea who the boys were or the location.

Intense frustration beat at him, as it had since gaining consciousness in Naples over three years ago. Physically, the doctors told him there was nothing wrong with him. But the attack by thieves had left him with huge gaps in his memory. Francesca hadn't cared about his foggy past. An angel, she'd rescued him after the assault and nursed him to health. Now whole in body, but scarred both on his face and in mind, Lucien had no recollection of his past. Francesca had said it didn't matter—they would make their own memories.

Together.

Lucien smiled, holding the memory close, until a voice jerked him back to the present.

"How long will it take to walk down to the beach? Does the tide make any difference to when I can go down to the cove?"

A groan built deep in his throat, his mouth curled up in disgust. That was all he needed—a woman who talked nonstop and demanded his attention.

***

"Hawk, the lookout sighted two people up on the cliff. Man and a woman."

Hawk turned to stare at the wizened man who'd called out. Beneath the loose black mask, his mouth firmed to a thin line of irritation. Damn inconvenient. He wanted to shift the cargo inland today, but that wouldn't be possible with strangers around.

"Did they see the lookout?" His low voice held authority. Power. It breached the distance between them easily.

Whiting raised his lantern to navigate the uneven, slippery floor of the cave until he stood in front of Hawk. "He said they did."

Hawk bit back his impatience. Damn idiot. Did none of them understand how the return of the long-lost heir threatened them? Hastings must have a guardian angel looking over his shoulder. A snarl built deep inside Hawk's chest, fighting for release. He refused to give in to the

luxury, the loss of control. Hastings might have escaped death at his hands twice, but it wouldn't happen a third time. On this occasion he had a plan—a foolproof strategy that would allow him to taunt Hastings before the final deathblow. Thank God he'd had the foresight to clear the tunnels leading beneath the castle. No more spur-of-the-moment attacks. Instead, he looked forward to weeks of enjoyable entertainment before the culmination of his scheming. The tension inside him eased at the thought.

"Tell him to take an empty sack and collect seaweed. Once the sack is full, tell him to carry it up the path." His words held enough bite to make the older man shuffle uneasily. Good. A little fear was a healthy commodity.

"Aye, Hawk." Whiting doffed his hat, half turned away to carry out the instructions, then hesitated. "And if they question him?"

Hawk shrugged, his mind already busy with alternative plans to transport the cargo. "They won't. If he carries the bag, his purpose will be self-evident."

"Right you are."

Whiting moved stealthily toward the mouth of the cave with a minimum of noise. The best of a dim-witted lot. At least this group carried out orders without question. Hawk heard the low hum of speech as Whiting relayed his message to the lookout.

A dull thud sounded from farther up the passage followed by a curse. Long strides took Hawk to the source of the noise. He surveyed the barrel on the cave floor. Brandy trickled from the cask, the fumes filling the air.

"Whiting will deduct that from your share. Do it again, and you'll deal with me." Hawk's voice lashed out, leaving the man pale in the flickering light of the lantern. "Understood?"

The man cowered but managed to meet his gaze for a brief moment. "Aye."

Hawk noticed the silence in the cave, and his gaze leaped to the rest of his workers. "Back to work. I want this cargo shifted by the end of the day. Move."

A flurry of activity greeted his order as the men put their backs into the job at hand. When Hawk was satisfied the work was progressing, he stalked to the mouth of the cave, passing Whiting on the way.

"Watch the men. I want this finished today."

"Today!"

“Today,” Hawk reiterated, his voice hard. “Supervise the men. I’ll keep watch on the cove. Go.”

“Aye,” Whiting bit out. “Sir.”

Hawk remained still until Whiting’s footsteps faded. But under the mask, his face tensed, eyes narrowed. Whiting’s attitude had changed over the last two months. He’d started to question orders. Damn, he didn’t have time for a power struggle. Not when everything he’d worked for looked as if it might be wrenched from his grasp, making all his plans for naught.

Hawk peered outside, along the shoreline. A man was leading a horse, followed by a woman. Hawk snorted. He would recognize that brute of a horse anywhere. Hell fire and be damned.

Hastings.

His hand itched to reach for his gun. He could finish this now. And solve each of his problems in one fell swoop. One shot would do the trick. His hand moved without volition to caress the pistol on his hip. One shot at close range, and Hastings would be gone.

Except that would make things too easy. Hawk stilled, frustration making him frown. He wanted Hastings to suffer for all the wrongs he had inflicted, to know who killed him and why. Hawk wanted to see his enemy’s face as his life ebbed away so he could savor his victory.

He intended to dance on his enemy’s grave.

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Rosalind followed the horse down the path, maintaining a wary, respectful distance. The black looked docile enough, the way it nuzzled at Hastings’s shoulder like a pet lamb, but she wasn’t taking any chances. After a nasty bite from a horse when she was a child, she preferred to keep safe from harm’s way. Walking on her own two feet or riding in a sturdy carriage rated as more sensible in her opinion. She’d leave the unpredictable four-legged creatures to her husband.

Her gaze fixed on Hastings as she absently fingered the bump on her head, wincing at the slight pain. Every time she thought of the intruder in her chamber, she came to Hastings. And each time, she discarded him as a suspect. She couldn’t explain why, but instinct told her he hadn’t been in her chamber. Gruff and irritable he might be, but she didn’t think he’d harm her. She sighed. Instead, he ignored her, which was a hundred times worse.

For a time she'd thought he'd forbid her to continue her walk. Rosalind sniffed, thinking his decree unnecessary. The castle itself presented a sight more danger than walking about the estate—what with all the strange noises and carryings on.

Her thoughts circled back to Hastings. Sometimes he seemed almost angry with her, other times terse to the point of rudeness. Then there were the odd visions that assailed her when she touched him.

A gust of wind whistled in from the sea, whipping back the hood of her cloak. Her hair toppled from the loose knot at the back of her head, long strands flying in front of her face, obscuring her view. She stumbled on a crumbly section of the path. A startled cry escaped as she fell.

The horse shied in alarm, jostling Hastings. He muttered an oath as he fought to calm the fractious animal. Rosalind's head jerked up warily.

"Whoa, Oberon. Steady, boy." Hastings smoothed his hand down his mount's glossy neck, and the beast ceased his nervous fidgeting.

"Ouch." She pushed up to a kneeling position. The small, sharp shells that littered the path had pierced her stockings and were digging painfully into her flesh. Tears stung her eyes, but she refused to let them fall, especially in front of Hastings. Instead, she scrambled to her feet and brushed down her skirts. Screwing up her hands until her fingernails dug into her palms helped keep the tears at bay.

"What do you think you were doing?" Hastings snapped.

Rosalind bit back the words trembling at her lips, her anger burning away the threatening tears. Surely that was obvious? She wanted to go for a walk on the beach, longed to taste the salt in the water and feel the sand running through her fingers. She intended to savor the new experience. "I __"

"You need a keeper." The bite in his voice made the tears burn again. "Let me see." He strode toward her, brushed aside her cloak and slid his hands under her woolen skirts before she could blink. The feel of his bare hands caressing her calves made her freeze in shock. But the snort of the horse snapped Rosalind to her senses.

"I—Don't do that!"

"You're bleeding." His tone brooked no argument.

"Good morning, sir," a masculine voice said.

The black horse shied for a second time. To her horror, Rosalind let out a muffled squeak. Hastings cursed, swept her up, hugging her close to his

side, and turned to calm his mount.

"Sorry I frightened your horse, sir." The man edged past Oberon.

Rosalind felt a stirring of sympathy for the man's predicament.

"You came from the cove?" Hastings demanded.

"Yes, sir. Collecting seaweed. Grows good vegetables. Sell it, I do." He swiped a hand over his forehead and glanced back down at the sea, a strange look of almost desperation on his face, as if he were afraid.

Rosalind followed his gaze to see what he was looking at. She saw nothing except the wide expanse of sand and sea. But the man seemed nervous. He shifted his sack from shoulder to shoulder, looking ill at ease.

The horse stirred restlessly, pawed at the ground and snorted, rolling his eyes. Oberon must be the cause of the man's unease. She didn't feel safe standing this close to the massive beast either.

The man wiped his face again, leaving a grubby mark, and scurried off with a muffled farewell.

Hastings scowled after the rapidly departing man and turned to face Rosalind. "I'll take a look at your knee."

Rosalind swallowed and backed up. The feel of his work-roughened hands sliding over her limbs lived with her still. The remembered sensation crouched at the forefront of her mind, and just thinking of it made her hot and shivery all over. Work-roughened? Her brows drew together in a frown. He'd stated he had estate business this afternoon. A vision formed in her mind, and it had nothing to do with her sight and everything to do with her imagination. A strong, robust man, naked to the waist, chopping wood…

Somehow, she didn't think Hastings would look skinny and frail under that shirt. She didn't think he'd look like the stable lad she'd surprised having a wash at the well. Heat flooded her face. Aghast at the direction of her thoughts she backed up farther still. Several times when she'd touched a man or woman by mistake, she'd seen risqué pictures in their minds. Now it was happening to her, and she wasn't sure she was comfortable with all the conflicting emotions roiling through her mind. They made her restless and excited at the same time, her stomach churning with unexpected nerves.

"Careful! You'll slide over the edge." Hastings reached over and with one effortless move heaved her to safety. "If you're sure you're uninjured, we should carry on." He jerked his head in the direction of the sun. "The noon hour approaches."

Rosalind took one look at his determined face and nodded hastily. “I’m fine,” she said, even though it was a lie. Her heart beat in a frantic tattoo and she couldn’t get the wretched picture of him out of her mind. The half-naked him…with the sheen of sweat coating his muscles.

Before he could remonstrate further, Rosalind plunged down the path at a breakneck speed, trying to outdistance her turbulent thoughts. Aunt Elizabeth would be mortified if she could read her thoughts or see her unladylike flight. Not that Rosalind was happy about the situation herself. It was difficult enough facing her husband without her mind conjuring visions of him naked.

Chapter Four

Lucien shook his head, befuddled by the woman's behavior. She'd looked at him like…like…He shuddered inwardly, feeling a lick of answering heat before he thrust it aside.

That was the way Francesca used to look at him, as if she wanted to eat him for her next meal.

He glowered at her rapidly departing figure. "A trick of the light."

This feeling, this jump of heat and awareness, was his body's reaction to her proximity. Any woman would have caused the same sensation. After all, he hadn't had a woman since Francesca. He hadn't wanted to.

Touching the woman had been a mistake. A big mistake, but she'd hurt herself so he excused his slip from grace.

Lucien tugged Oberon down the last steep portion of the path before it flattened to sandy beach. With childlike glee, the woman tugged off her gloves and bent to pick up handfuls of sand. The sand slid through her fingers, small, shiny fragments catching the sun as they fell. A soft laugh of pure joy drifted on the breeze. How long had it been since he'd laughed in a carefree way? He knew the answer without even thinking.

Ten months to the day.

He hadn't laughed since Francesca's murder and hadn't wanted to. Anguish clogged his throat. His resolve hardened. Enough. Time to focus on the task at hand. Find Francesca's murderer, bring him to justice, then make the trip back to Naples.

Once revenge was his, he'd return home.

The woman darted forward and scooped up a glistening white shell. A few seconds later, she changed direction and pounced on another one. She splashed into the sea, heedless of the water wetting her boots, to wash her treasures. Holding them up to the light, she studied them carefully and slid them into the depths of her voluminous cloak, then darted off again.

Lucien sighed and followed, leading Oberon behind him. Without warning, he sensed someone watching them. He glanced at the woman but

her attention was on a pile of flotsam washed up by the tide. His eyes narrowed as he casually searched the top of the cliff where the path ran. Nothing. Yet his gut screamed at him to tread cautiously. He scanned the beach but could discern nothing out of place. Still, the hairs at the back of his neck prickled. He slowed, having learned to trust his instincts.

Up ahead on the expanse of sand exposed by the retreating tide, he saw footprints. More footprints than one man would have reasonably made while collecting seaweed.

Oberon snorted, sensing his watchful concern. Lucien frowned while splitting his attention between the woman and the rest of the cove. The nagging feeling that wouldn't go away suddenly bloomed into a concrete thought. He'd watched smugglers landing their prize last night at high tide. At the time, the sea had covered most of the sand, yet this morning several sets of footprints were clearly discernible. It looked as though they led to the network of caves he'd discovered at the far end of the cove. Which meant this cove was definitely not a safe place for the woman to walk alone. Even one of the burly footmen Lady Augusta employed would be little deterrent against a smuggler's gang intent on mischief. Although he hadn't heard rumors that this group was prone to violence, the excise men ran an ongoing bloody battle with smuggling gangs farther down the East Sussex coast.

The woman meandered up the beach, and Lucien made a clicking sound to Oberon to hurry him up. It was best if he kept a close eye on her. Hopefully, she would soon tire of wet boots and sand clinging to her fair skin.

The length of the cove later, she was still skipping along, pouncing on each new pile of washed-up debris with childish delight. A grudging smile tugged his lips, only dying when he had to follow her back to the other end of the cove. Shaking his head with rising impatience, he strode forward. "It's time to go."

At the same time, the woman turned to him. The look on her face was grim, her mouth pursed tight in annoyance. "Look what I've found." She thrust a scruffy black thing at him. "Look!"

Before he was able to offer an opinion or even discover what had raised her ire, she clutched the mass of black to her chest.

"Look at what?"

Her mouth smoothed out, like a flower blossoming, and turned up into a ravishing smile of delight. Lucien blinked at the suddenness of her mood change.

"It's alive. I'm taking it home with me." Her blue eyes deepened in color about the same time her dainty chin tilted upward in the small act of stubbornness he was coming to recognize. Some sort of creature, he deduced, but he had no idea of its identity since she clutched it protectively to her bosom.

"What is alive?" Annoyance simmered through him. Did she think he was some sort of unthinking monster? Then he answered the question himself. Of course she did.

Only monsters looked like him.

"It's a cat. A kitten. We should return to the castle. I need my herbal remedies." That chin of hers was still pointing upward in determined defiance, imperious despite her small stature.

Lucien sighed, more than ready to leave the cove and not about to offer an argument to the contrary. He bent from the waist in a stiff bow. "After you, my lady."

The look of surprise that flickered across her face almost made him smile. Perhaps he was learning how to manage the woman. A rusty-sounding chuckle escaped at the thought. He sobered immediately, arching one brow in silent enquiry when she remained rooted to the spot, gaping at him.

"Do you want to walk up the path in front of Oberon?" Lucien had noticed her reticence when it came to his mount. Despite her obvious liking for the kitten, she wasn't a lover of horseflesh.

"Thank you." The words were stiff and a little ungracious as she swept past with her nose in the air.

Lucien grinned, the action feeling foreign and awkward. The woman looked as prickly as the hedgehog he'd surprised during his midnight rambling last night. And he'd discovered something. To make sure she kept her distance, all he needed was Oberon at his side.

The walk back to Castle St. Clare took half the time the outward journey had. The woman marched briskly up the path in front of him, clutching the kitten protectively and not attempting a word of chatter. She crooned to the creature but, apart from that, they undertook the journey in

silence. In the outer courtyard they parted ways. Lucien led Oberon to the stables, and the woman disappeared inside the castle.

Lucien paused. She hadn't cast him a second look. Not one. Oberon nudged him in the back and, with an impatient snort, sent him lurching forward.

"All right." Lucien pushed the woman to the back of his mind and smoothed a hand over his mount's withers. The woman was of no importance anyway.

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Tickell, the St. Clare butler, opened the heavy oak door a second before Rosalind grasped the head of the brass lion knocker. She smiled her thanks and rushed past, eager to get to her chamber.

"Where have you been?"

The stern feminine screech echoed through the Great Hall and stopped Rosalind dead. A log resettled in the grate, sending a shower of sparks sailing upward into the chimney. She used the brief distraction to take a deep breath before turning slowly to face Lady Augusta. One look at Lady Augusta's pinched face told her she was in for a tongue-lashing, no matter what excuse she offered.

Forcing her mouth to curve into a polite smile, she said, "I've been for a walk, my lady."

Lady Augusta stared down her long nose, her gaze imperious. "A walk? I expected you here." The elderly woman swished her fan through the air in a manner that made Rosalind's knuckles tingle. "A household this size does not run by itself."

Nothing like starting off wrong-footed. She hadn't realized Lady Augusta wanted to oversee her in the household duties. That wasn't the impression the elderly woman had given yesterday. Rosalind sighed inwardly and wondered how to proceed. She'd have to apologize. The kitten stirred in her hands and let out a weak mew. "I'm sorry—"

"What have you there?" Lady Augusta thrust her face closer and let out a hiss. "A cat! It looks diseased. Remove it at once. I won't have it in my castle. Filthy beast."

A nervous tremor raced down her body, but instinct told her if she let Lady Augusta win this round, she was doomed. Determined to hold fast,

she straightened and prepared for battle. The kitten depended on her.

The wooden door at their backs burst open. A flurry of breeze stirred the tapestries on the far wall before Tickell closed the door after Hastings. The fire hissed with renewed life, sending up a sullen plume of smoke.

“Aunt.” He inclined his head in a respectful nod.

“Tell her to remove that vermin from my castle,” Lady Augusta demanded, her voice high and querulous. “It’s unlucky to have a black cat indoors. Witch’s beast!” she ended with a hiss.

Rosalind backed up at the vehement tone but kept her gaze on Lady Augusta. The elderly woman quivered with anger, the ribbons on her bonnet rattling and echoing the sentiment.

“Take the cat to your room and keep it there,” Hastings said without looking directly at her.

Lady Augusta swelled with indignation. “But—”

“Go, Rosalind.”

She hurried off before Lady Augusta changed Hastings’s mind. But she couldn’t resist a quick look over her shoulder before she left. Hastings was watching her. She felt a strange warmth inside as she ducked through the door and out of his sight.

He’d called her by her given name.

Perhaps there was hope for the future after all.

Rosalind dashed down the same dimly lit passageway she’d walked this morning. A smile flitted across her mouth as she skipped to the end of the corridor. Not only had Hastings called her by name, but he’d taken her side against Lady Augusta. She stroked a finger across the kitten’s head and felt her smile widen. Both things were hopeful signs.

At a second fork in the corridor, she hesitated before turning left. More portraits of long-forgotten ancestors filled the walls, interspaced with alcoves holding marble busts. Slowing her steps, she turned a slow circle. None of the portraits looked familiar. Had she walked this way this morning? When she looked back in the direction she had come from, she noted footprints on the floor. Her footprints. She turned again and frowned at the lack of footprints. This wasn’t the way she’d walked this morning.

“Bother.” She’d have to turn back and try the other way. Castle St. Clare, she was learning, consisted of a multitude of rooms. Some belonged to centuries earlier while others, such as the ones the family used for

entertaining guests, were recent additions. Trying to navigate the place was like exploring a maze.

Rosalind turned left again and entered a cavern-like room with a soaring ceiling. Wicked knives decorated the walls while a ray of light from an arrow slit highlighted a display of tarnished shields.

Another room she didn't recognize from this morning. She studied a rusty set of armor. A battle-axe hung on the wall alongside the armor.

When the kitten stirred, Rosalind stepped toward the open door at the far end of the room. From a second arrow slit, she caught a glimpse of the sea. The grayish-blue water stretched as far as she could see. In that moment, she decided to find the entrance to one of the towers. The climb to the top would surely be worth the effort. The views would be magnificent.

She stared out another arrow slit. The steady drip-drip of water sounded continuously, and a sudden blast of cold air made her shiver. The kitten quivered in her arms, reminding Rosalind of the need to hurry. She spun and headed to the door at the far end of the armory room. A whooshing followed by a loud thump made her start, a small cry of surprise escaping. The battle-axe now lay on the floor, right where she had stood but a few minutes ago.

Swallowing hastily to force her heart back to its rightful place, she stared up at the place on the wall where the axe had hung. The wooden hook hung at a drunken angle. A shudder swept down her body as she realized how close she'd come to injury.

The same ill-at-ease sensation—as if someone was spying on her—made the area between her shoulder blades itch insistently. Rosalind whirled, her gaze searching the room. Nothing seemed out of place. Her nervous laugh echoed back to her. Imagination. No doubt the hook was old and perhaps unstable. It was merely bad luck.

Shaking off the uneasy feeling as nonsense, Rosalind increased her pace and burst into another unfamiliar passage, her shoes clattering on the stone floor.

A lone sconce lit the way, creating unwelcoming shadows and dark corners. Rosalind drew in a lungful of the musty air. The uneasy feeling persisted. Gooseflesh sprang up on her arms and legs. She glanced over her shoulder again and moved faster. Anxiety of the like she'd never felt before threatened to overwhelm her. Almost running now, she plowed into an obstacle.

A scream tore from her throat when she realized another person was clutching her arms. “Let me go!”

“Rosalind.” The insistent voice pierced her panic, cutting through her whimper of fear. “Lady Hastings!” This time a shake accompanied her name.

Her eyes focused on the man standing in front of her. She smelled his shaving soap and the faint tang of the sea on his clothes along with smoke from a recently smoked pipe, sucked in a deep breath and finally found her voice. “Mr. Soulden.”

Charles Soulden’s hands dropped to his sides. Concern shimmered in his blue eyes as he stepped away. “Lady Hastings. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“I…I wasn’t expecting anyone. I wasn’t looking where I was going,” she murmured, feeling heat scorch her cheeks. “It is I who must apologize.”

Charles Soulden sketched a bow and smiled with boyish charm. “No harm done.” He stepped past Rosalind as if to leave.

“Wait!” Rosalind had no idea where she was. He couldn’t leave her here. Lost. Not that she wanted to admit that the floor plan of the castle disoriented her.

His blond brows rose toward his wig. “May I help you in some way?”

Rosalind glanced down at the kitten in her hands. “Ah…which way…?”

A grin twitched at the corners of his mouth. “It does take time to learn how to navigate the castle.”

In his cream breeches and jacket, he looked like a golden angel. All that was missing was a pair of wings.

“I’m not lost,” Rosalind snapped, irritated at noticing his good looks when she was a married woman.

“No, of course not. Walk to the end of this passage and turn left. You should find yourself at the end of the Long Gallery near the chapel.”

“Thank you.” Shame tempered the irritation lacing her voice. He was being helpful; he couldn’t help his good looks any more than Hastings was to blame for the scar running the length of his face. “I can find my way from there.”

His grin widened as if he saw straight through her. “What’s that you have there?”

“A kitten.”

His eyes twinkled mischievously. “Does Lady Augusta know?”

“Yes,” Rosalind said, her tone indicating she didn’t wish to discuss the matter. The kitten squirmed, making guilt ripple through her. She’d dallied long enough. “I must go. Good day.”

“Good day, Lady Hastings.”

Rosalind hurried down the passage, following Mr. Soulden’s directions. Five minutes later she burst into her chamber more than a little out of breath.

Mary thrust aside her darning and leaped up at the suddenness of her appearance, her freckled face paling. “Miss? What on earth?”

“Where’s my healing bag, Mary?”

“What do you have there?”

“A kitten. The poor thing was half-drowned when I found it. I suspect it came from a ship, and it either fell or was tossed into the sea. My bag, Mary.”

Mary bustled away and returned with Rosalind’s pouch of herbs and ointments. “How could it survive, falling in the water that way?” She drew closer then jerked back in alarm when Rosalind pulled back her cloak. “It be black!”

Rosalind scowled at her maid. “This is not a witch’s cat.”

“Hmm.” Mary pursed her lips, looked as if she might add another comment but desisted on seeing Rosalind’s glare.

“I need a hot brick to make a warm bed for the kitten.” Rosalind turned her attention to the little creature. Still damp and bedraggled, it shivered and looked downright pitiful. Huge hazel eyes gazed at her for an instant before sliding shut. The kitten gave another convulsive shudder, and Rosalind leaped into action.

She rubbed the kitten briskly with a soft linen towel, then she checked him for injuries. Although skinny and in need of food, there were no obvious wounds. Mary returned with a hastily assembled bed, and Rosalind was about to place the kitten inside when his paws snared her attention—his toes, to be more precise. She gasped and whipped a cover over the kitten so only his head was visible.

“That cat is black,” Mary stated, with a toss of her head.

Rosalind frowned at the top of the kitten’s head. And he had too many toes! Thank goodness Mary hadn’t noticed.

A loud thump on the chamber door startled them both. For an instant, they stared at each other, silent messages passing to and fro while they

decided how to proceed. The kitten had made Rosalind forget her troubles, albeit for a short time. A second insistent thump had Mary scurrying to answer. She jerked the door open and stepped back. Rosalind froze.

Hastings.

Rosalind settled her attention back on the kitten, rubbing it gently with the cover she had thrown over it. “Lord Hastings? May I help you with something?”

She hoped he wasn’t going to make her get rid of the kitten after all. His forbidding expression indicated something dire. Then a thought occurred, and she gasped out loud. He hadn’t come to bed her. Had he?

“I came to…” His mouth snapped shut and his scar seemed to glow, making him look like a ghostly apparition from one of Mary’s tales.

“Y-yes?” Her hands flexed as she glanced at him. That one glimpse was all she needed. Apprehension battled with disappointment as she accepted the truth of the matter. His expression was that of a man acting against his will. She didn’t need to think overly hard on the matter. She wanted an agreeable husband, one who wanted children as much as she did.

Lucien concentrated on the woman while inside he railed at his stupidity. He shouldn’t have come, but then he seemed to make one mistake after the other with the English mouse.

He inhaled deeply, trying to prod sense into his dull brain. Another mistake. The room smelled of her, of flowers and greenery—the outdoors.

A cheerful fire burned in the grate behind her, making the pale blond hair glow like a full moon hanging in a velvet sky. Jerking his gaze from the sight, he tried to rid his mind of the unwanted image. He cleared his throat in preparation to tell her why he’d sought her company.

A soft shuffle to his right made him realize the maid was witness to his stupidity.

“Johnson, the head groom, is gifted in treating animals. Take the beast to him.” Although he sounded abrupt, he couldn’t stop the anger. Each time he looked at the woman, fury built and grew, writhing inside him like a raging beast, yet the sane part of him acknowledged he owed a duty to her. Good or bad, she was now his wife. He tried to remind himself she wasn’t responsible for Francesca’s death, but the resentment remained. The English mouse was alive.

He glanced about the room, taking in the feminine fripperies—a hairbrush inlaid with mother of pearl, a straw hat, a nightgown strewn

across the bed, colorful ribbons and satin bows that reminded him of Francesca and her delight of beautiful things. Savagely, he locked the painful memories away.

"Well?" he demanded. "Do you wish me to summon a footman?"

"I don't need help." Her chin tilted upward.

Lucien nodded curtly and stalked to the door, in a hurry to leave the chamber and the woman's presence. "As you will. I must go. Lady Augusta will meet with you this afternoon in the Great Hall. Lady Radford and her daughter, Lady Sophia, are visiting."

"Thank you for telling me," she said.

Lucien paused with his hand on the door latch, every sense suddenly alert. He turned, his gaze sweeping the room, finally coming to rest on the woman. She arched one blond brow in a quizzical manner.

He frowned. For once, his instincts were flawed. He shrugged off his sense of unease and strode from the woman's presence. The only element of danger in the chamber was the woman.

Chapter Five

“Three weeks.” Lucien forced his arms into his shirt and yanked the black fabric over his shoulders, fastening the buttons with jerky fingers. “Why does it seem so much longer?”

And why had he taken to talking to himself? It was *her,* his new viscountess. Their nuptials twenty-two days ago had messed with his plans. Finding Francesca’s murderer remained his top priority, not puzzling out his strange reaction to the English mouse.

He finger-combed his hair, dragging the long strands off his face to tie back. A folded scrap of paper sitting on the floor inside his chamber door grabbed his attention. Frowning, he completed his queue before stooping to retrieve the note.

Stay out of smuggler business unless you wish to face the consequences.

Fury struck him as he read the words, and he crumpled the paper, tossing it aside in disgust. Either the smugglers were educated or they’d paid someone to write the note for them. A cynical laugh escaped him. Nothing in the note or words gave him a lead. Not that it mattered. They might think they could warn him off, but it wouldn’t work. He jammed his feet in his boots and left his room.

Lucien stomped through the Great Hall, disturbing a pair of maids with his mumbling. They paused in their polishing and bobbed a curtsey. One turned her face so she didn’t have to confront his scar while the other stared intently at his groin before closing her right eye in a saucy wink. Lucien averted his gaze. The brazen, dark-haired maid had offered to warm his bed several times, which didn’t make sense given the way she never actually looked at his face. Each time, he’d sent her on her way, but she continued to watch him, making him feel like a particularly tasty slice of tart. He’d have to do something about her soon, but not today.

“Good day.” The giggles that followed him down the hall made him scowl harder. Living in the castle meant there were no secrets—all would know of the state of affairs between him and the English mouse. No doubt,

they discussed the matter in depth while going about their duties. Lucien cursed inwardly.

He continued down the brightly lit passage to the steward's office. At first, he'd found the meetings with the steward tedious, an unavoidable aspect of his presence. However, he'd come to enjoy the hours of honest toil. Rolling up his sleeves and working with his hands until he was too tired to think had filled the lonely hours. And the time spent out on the estate had proved helpful in his search for Hawk. Gossip picked up from the locals continued to help, yet they ignored direct questions on the subject.

Lucien's jaw clenched. The man was a powerful force in the area, but he was closing in; the anonymous note in his chamber warning him off confirmed the instinct.

Lucien thumped on the closed door of the office and entered without waiting. A fire burned in the study hearth, heating the room to an unbearable temperature. The steward sat behind his desk, a somber and earnest expression on his face, his quill scratching as he made notations in the estate ledgers.

He looked up at Lucien's arrival. "Viscount Hastings."

"Maxwell." Lucien inclined his head and sank into a wooden chair near him. "What needs doing next?"

Maxwell peered over the top of his spectacles. "Several cottages require repairs. I know it's late in the season, but I have been so busy. There's been no one to supervise the work. But surely you don't intend to start the job now?" A tide of ruddy color spread from the man's cheeks and upward toward his horsehair wig. He shuffled on his seat, avoiding Lucien's gaze before blurting, "You are still newly wed, in your honeymoon period. Surely you don't wish to upset—"

At that moment, St. Clare hobbled into the study to join them. He paused, brows rising. "Hastings, what are you doing here? You should spend time with your charming young wife instead of concerning yourself with estate business. I want to bounce a grandson on my knee before I leave this world. The only way to leave a mark on the world is a man's get. I shouldn't have to tell you that, boy."

Lucien gritted his teeth. He was not Hastings. He was not the boy. He was the owner of a successful estate in Italy, and he intended to return as soon as he discovered Hawk's identity and exacted his revenge. "The estate needs attention before the cold weather sets in."

“A few days will make little difference.” St. Clare shot Maxwell an amused glance. “Next week is soon enough to start the chore. I’m sure there are things you’d rather be doing.” A dry chuckle bounced between them, the unspoken sentiment raising Lucien’s hackles. “Things far more pleasurable than toiling on the estate.” St. Clare closed one eye in a salacious wink. “Enjoy the marriage while you can.”

“There’s no one to oversee the work.” Lucien ignored the man’s insinuation that he should take the woman to bed and keep her there until her belly swelled with child. The idea made his stomach churn.

“Charles will take care of the repairs.”

A snort escaped Lucien. The honorable Charles Soulden was a useless fop. His so-called cousin spent his nights carousing about the countryside with his friend Viscount Mansfield, his days sleeping away his excesses. Work? The man didn’t know the meaning of the word. “I believe Charles has social obligations to fulfill. I heard him inform Lady Augusta of them last night.”

St. Clare shrugged, leaning heavily on his ebony cane. “No hurry. As I said, a day or two will make little difference.”

Irritated with the man’s attitude, Lucien turned to Maxwell. “I’ll start the repairs today. Rosalind will understand the need for my absence.” After wandering the estate, Lucien knew the need for repairs was dire. It was no wonder the village people accepted money from the smugglers in exchange for providing labor and a cloak of secrecy. Lucien could hardly blame them for trying to provide for their families. What was also obvious was the growing resentment from the villagers and tenants who lived on the estate.

Impatient with talk, Lucien leaped to his feet, wanting the hard physical activity of estate work. He needed to fall into his bed at night with his limbs heavy and aching with tiredness. For then, he might actually sleep.

Lucien paced to the door in front of the desk, eager to be gone. “I’ll put the work in motion. Are the building supplies ordered?”

The man blinked. “There was no point. The work wasn’t scheduled.”

“I’ll take care of it.” Lucien marched from the study. Long strides carried him into the outer bailey. A raven cawed from its roost atop the disused North Tower. *Damn pile of stones.* It needed dismantling before it toppled into the sea.

At the stables a groom came running at his call. After a short delay, he mounted Oberon and trotted from the stable yard, glad to be gone from the

oppressive bastion.

He urged Oberon into a canter. For once, Oberon was content with the pace and they loped alongside a hedgerow, heading for the cluster of cottages on the edge of St. Clare village.

A crop of barley grew in the field adjacent, the stalks spindly and sparse for the time of the season. Planted too late, perhaps with inferior seeds.

Was it any wonder the village people relied on the smugglers to supplement their incomes? It was a matter of survival.

As Lucien reached the brow of the hill, he had a view of St. Clare village in the valley below. A plume of smoke rose from a chimney. In front of the nearest cottage, a red rooster scratched in the dirt. A toddler crawled through an open door out into the muddy street. Somewhere a blacksmith worked his forge, the incessant pounding of a hammer beating in time with Oberon's hooves. A group of women who'd been talking ceased their prattle and turned to stare. The scene bore little resemblance to the prosperous Bacci estate in Italy.

Lucien slowed Oberon and dismounted. Every man, woman and child in sight froze, clear suspicion on their faces. Even the rooster seemed wary, squawking in fright and disappearing into an alley running between two cottages. Lucien could understand the attitude. He was finding it difficult to trust these days, second guessing the motives of everyone around him.

"My lord?" The frail woman elected as spokesman was so skinny she looked as though a gust of wind would send her soaring through the skies.

"I have come to check the cottages, to see which require repairs."

They greeted his words with a stunned silence. Lucien frowned once again over the lack of concern from the castle.

A huge man with bulging biceps and a blacksmith's hammer in one hand appeared behind the group of women. "Talk be cheap."

The women backed up as if distancing themselves from the man.

"Do you have time to give me a tour?" Lucien asked. "Can you show me what requires attention?"

The man stepped closer, pausing to spit a wad of tobacco from the corner of his mouth. The brown lump landed two inches from Lucien's highly polished black boots. "Aye, for all the good it will do."

Lucien ignored the clear challenge. "Is there someone to attend to my horse?"

“My son will watch your ’orse.” He snapped his fingers and a child appeared at his elbow. “Take his lordship’s ’orse to the stables.”

The awed look on the youngster’s face as he stroked a grubby hand down Oberon’s neck reassured Lucien his mount would come to no harm. He handed the reins to the boy, watched to see if Oberon accepted the boy before turning to the man. “I am in your hands, sir.”

“Aye.” A blob of spittle landed on the ground at his feet.

Lucien chose to ignore the action, knowing he needed to earn the villager’s respect. Trust would take time because, from what he had seen, they’d no reason to believe anything a representative from the castle told them. “After you, sir.”

“Humph! I ain’t never bin called sir before. Name’s Sam Judson, the smithy.”

Lucien offered his hand and Judson’s mouth dropped open in bemusement. His gaze rose to size up Lucien. It wasn’t difficult to read his mind, and Lucien felt renewed anger at the St. Clare family. They owed a duty to the village people—a sacred trust. He held his hand steady for a moment longer and was about to lower it to his side when the smithy extended his beefy one. A tinge of red shaded the man’s cheeks as their hands clasped in a brief shake.

“What will you show me first?” Lucien asked. “Should we start at this end of the village and work our way to the other end?”

Judson hesitated, then his expressive face hardened in resolution. “This way, my lord.”

Over half of the cottages Judson showed Lucien required work to make them habitable. The leaking roof on one cottage and rotten timber on another were minor problems and easily solved. The empty well meant villagers had to carry water from a stream at the opposite end of the village. That promised more of a challenge. Judson introduced him to several men and mentioned the names of the tenants in each of the cottages. By the end of the tour, Lucien’s initial anger had solidified to a hard lump in his gut. This was no way to treat tenants. And by God, he’d see improvements before he left. The stolen identity forced on him would do some good after all.

Judson coughed to attract his attention. “Here comes your lady, my lord.”

Francesca? Lucien straightened from his observation of the well. A smile formed on his lips before abruptly fading when he remembered she was gone. His mouth tightened. What the devil was the English mouse doing in the village? He'd told her not to stray from the castle without protection. Damn it! Hadn't he heard Lady Augusta the previous evening request her aid with the latest in the stream of visitors to Castle St. Clare? At the time he'd issued a silent prayer of thanks because the visitors kept his wife busy at the castle. The cantankerous old bat would make her displeasure known and they'd suffer the consequences tonight at dinner.

His eyes narrowed as the woman approached, a slender figure in a blue gown and cloak and a scrap of a hat perched on top of her head. She picked her way around the biggest puddles and splashed through others with scant regard for her clothes.

"I thought I told you to take a footman with you if you left the castle," he said when she stopped in front of him.

"Matthew escorted us. I told him he could visit his friends. Since you were in plain sight, I thought that would be acceptable." Her smile was wide and sunny.

Lucien ground his teeth together. "What are you doing here?"

"Exploring the village." She sounded a little puzzled. "All I've seen of my new home is the beach. Lady Augusta has kept me so busy with household tasks and visitors this is the first chance I've had to leave the castle again. Besides, I have some knowledge of healing. I thought I could help." She indicated the bag she held in her right hand.

"What about your appointment with Lady Augusta? I thought she wished your help with entertaining the vicar."

"Lady Augusta is unwell and has taken to her bed. She asked me to send a footman with her regrets to the vicar and his wife and cancel their visit for today." The woman stirred and chewed her bottom lip. He registered the gesture of nerves. When she glanced away, he continued to study her face, positive she wasn't telling the truth.

He scanned the surroundings, the cluster of squalid buildings and the unkempt villagers. Why would she struggle through the mud to soil her hands? She darted another look in his direction. Under his scrutiny, her expression remained guileless, but she was still chewing her lip. A sudden thought occurred. Did she know Hawk? Was that why she was acting so skittish? Although the woman hailed from Gloucestershire, it was possible

they were acquainted. A sick sensation made his insides roil. Was she conspiring with the man? Or had the man gained her trust since her arrival at the castle under the guise of helping the villagers? Her soft heart was evident in her every action, from speaking kindly to the servants to rescuing that creature from the sea. Would her kindness extend to Hawk?

His enemy.

"Here comes Mary," she said, turning back to him. "We intend to visit Mistress Baker. The cook told us to ask for her and gave us directions, but I fear we took a wrong turning."

"I will escort you," Lucien found himself saying.

"There's no need." Innocent blue eyes peered at him, soft and limpid as the Bacci fishponds.

No, the idea of the English mouse in collusion with Hawk was ridiculous. With all that'd happened and his impatience to settle the matter, his imagination was working overtime, grasping at straws.

"Judson, where does Mistress Baker live?"

Judson scratched his head and sniffed. "In the street with the open drain. It's the cottage with the good roof."

Lucien nodded, remembering the stench distinctly. The grain of mistrust blossomed into full-fledged suspicion when Rosalind opened her mouth again, probably to protest. Why would she refuse his offer of aid if she had nothing to hide?

"This way." He offered his arm. He didn't intend to take no as an answer. "Judson, order the supplies we discussed. Tell the rest of the men we start work tomorrow."

"Aye, my lord."

Lucien nodded at Judson then turned to the woman. "Come."

Rosalind stood her ground. "I'm sure you are busy. Mary and I will find Mistress Baker."

Lucien's first instinct was to not let her out of his sight, but she'd hardly lead him to Hawk if he hovered like a broody hen. He hesitated. Perhaps it was best to back off and watch from a distance. Give the woman enough space to incriminate herself…if she were truly guilty. Maybe it was his presence that disturbed her.

"I will escort you to the door and return to the castle." The look of relief on her face made him want to curse out loud. "This way."

She glanced at his arm and hesitated before resting her pale fingers on his coat sleeve so lightly he barely felt her touch.

A soft gasp escaped her, a look of consternation flitting across her face before her lips tightened in an expression of pain. She refused to meet his gaze, but that shouldn't have surprised him. Most people were uncomfortable gazing upon his ruined face.

"What is it?" Every survival instinct he possessed jumped to full alert.

"Nothing of import. Ah, Mary," the woman said when her servant appeared. "Hastings knows the direction of the cottage we're seeking."

Lucien intercepted the look that passed between the two women. Yes, they were both part of a deception. It made him even more determined to discover what they were hiding.

"This way." Emotion made his voice gruff. He stepped over a muddy puddle, guiding his viscountess around it. She clutched his arm hesitantly, as if he'd bite. And the ginger-haired servant was no better, sending wary glances when she thought he wouldn't notice.

Clouds obscured the last weak rays of sun, making the cluster of poorly maintained cottages appear even more dilapidated. A scrawny black pup cowered behind an overturned bucket, growling ferociously once they were safely past. A muscle ticked in his tightly held jaw, and he was more determined than ever to improve the lot of the villagers.

As they progressed down the rutted track, Rosalind did her best to disengage from his touch. The pained expression remained, although each time she looked at him she pasted a bright smile on her face. Lucien's irritation kicked up into anger. The woman thought he was so repulsive she couldn't look him straight in the face.

At Mistress Baker's cottage, Lucien rapped on the bowed door before standing aside. "I'll arrange for Matthew to meet you here. Don't set out for the castle without him."

The obvious relief on her face made his anger burn stronger and he battled the inclination to shake the English mouse until the truth spilled from her pale pink lips. Without another word, he wheeled about and strode away before he gave in to the urge to throttle her.

When Lucien reached a narrow lane running between the Nag's Head public house and the hostelry stables, he paused. A young boy stared, but when he noticed Lucien watching him, he raced away. Satisfied no one else

observed him, Lucien slid from sight, hurried to the end of the lane and circled back to the rear of Mistress Baker's cottage.

Damn, he stuck out like a boil on a man's arse lurking out here. One glance out the window and they'd catch him. He hovered, weighing the risks, and finally decided to stay put. He inched closer, hugging the walls of the mud and wood cottage. The soft murmur of feminine voices filtered through to him, only one word in two audible. He scowled, frustrated, tired and plain irritated with the situation.

He sucked in a deep breath and willed himself past the anger so he could concentrate. Damn, he needed to see what was happening. His gut churned relentlessly, telling him something wasn't quite right and he'd learned to trust his instincts. Shaking his head, he edged closer to a small hole in the cottage wall.

The woman's soft voice sounded much closer now. "Show me where your leg hurts, Mistress Baker."

Lucien watched his wife bend over a large woman lying on a pallet. The maid stood with her back to the window, partially blocking his view.

"By the joint or right in the bone?" His wife glanced at her maid and once again, they seemed to communicate silently.

The maid surged forward and clasped the sick woman's hands in hers. "Tell me about your family. You have children?"

The sick woman groaned but rallied. "Aye. Four. 'Twas six but we lost two to the plague that passed through three year ago."

Sympathy flickered on the maid's face. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Aye," the woman said. "And I might lose more if Hawk doesn't leave off flashing 'is coin."

Every muscle in Lucien's body tensed as he strained to listen, to withhold his shout of jubilation.

"Hawk?" his wife murmured. "I've heard of this man but haven't met him yet."

Lucien detected nothing more than casual interest.

Mistress Baker exhaled loudly. "Probably won't. Keeps to hisself. Head of the smugglers hereabouts. Don't stand for no nonsense. He has all the people involved. Safer that way so no one'll bleat to the authorities, not that we would, given the coin 'e pays. Time's tough right now and 'e keeps us bellies full."

"Does the man live in the village?" his wife asked.

“No one knows ’is face. Wears a mask, ’e does. Even when ’e ’elps unload.” Alarm crossed her face without warning, and Mistress Baker clutched at Rosalind’s arm. “Here I be gossiping to you ’bout smugglers. Comes of being on me own too much. Best not ask questions. If yer meant to know, you’ll be told. Safer that way.”

The soft scuff of boot against stone came from behind. Lucien leaped away from the cottage to the dilapidated building next door and pretended to inspect the structure for soundness. Without acknowledging his watcher, he moved along the alley, examining the buildings. At the end, he casually turned. There was no one in sight but he sensed the watchful surveillance.

Lucien cursed under his breath. The timing stunk. Just when things turned interesting, when he thought he was about to learn something helpful. At least the woman had confirmed what he’d already guessed—the entire village was ensnared with Hawk. Even though the fact was now confirmed, frustration bubbled inside him. Because he was an unknown quantity to the villagers, they refused to talk to him.

But they’d talked to the woman…

Aggravated, but realizing he would learn little else today, he strode to the stables and called for Oberon. When the blacksmith’s son led him out to the yard, his mount danced nervously at the end of his reins. The lad handed him over with clear relief. A good, hard gallop would sort out his mount, and hopefully settle his own disquiet.

Lucien smoothed his hand down Oberon’s neck and murmured quietly, but his horse refused to settle. He snorted, tossing his head and rolling his eyes. His glossy black ears flicked back until they lay flat against his head. Lucien swung up into the saddle. Oberon snorted again and reared. Lucien heard the startled shout of the stable lad but had his hands full trying to control his horse. Oberon’s front legs hit the ground, then, without pausing, he bolted. The wind whistled past Lucien’s ears, tearing locks of hair from his queue. Hedges became a green blur as he struggled to control his mount.

“Whoa, damn it!” Lucien tightened his grip on the reins and pulled back using brute strength. Oberon took no notice.

Lucien steered him at a hedge, hoping it would slow their breakneck speed. He felt Oberon gather under him and they sailed over the hedge, barely slowing their pace. He hauled back on the reins. If anything, his actions stirred Oberon to greater speed. His mount emitted a frantic whinny that sounded uncannily like a scream. Bucking and rearing, he tried to

throw Lucien. When that failed, Oberon galloped headlong down a narrow twisting track. They hurtled into the forest. Overhanging branches tore at Lucien's clothes, smacked his face, gouged his limbs. Mud splattered up until it coated both he and Oberon.

What the hell was wrong? Lucien leaned forward and instantly Oberon slowed. He eased back into the saddle. Oberon immediately bucked, twisting and screwing his muscular body. Sweat lathered his glossy neck, each breath roaring from his nostrils like a fabled fire-breathing dragon. A branch overhanging the path almost dislodged Lucien.

"Damn it!" He eased his weight off the saddle again. Oberon slowed, confirming Lucien's suspicions. Keeping his weight forward, Lucien tightened the reins. Oberon obeyed, and Lucien cursed. Someone had interfered with his mount while he'd conducted his tour of the village.

Lucien slowed Oberon until he halted by a large oak, his sides heaving from the mad gallop. Lucien dismounted and undid the cinch with quick, angry movements. A trickle of blood ran from under the saddle blanket. He must be closing in on Hawk, if that bastard felt the need to take action like this.

A sharp thorn almost as long as his little finger protruded from the saddle blanket. On closer inspection, he found three more. Yanking them free, he tossed them to the forest floor where they would do no further harm. The thorns had gouged into his horse's flesh, but he had been the target rather than his mount. A few days' rest and Oberon's wound would heal. Lucien replaced the saddle and tightened the girth enough to keep the saddle on, but no more. He gathered the reins and commenced the long walk back to the castle, seething at Hawk's effrontery.

Many of the villagers worked with the smugglers, but did they work only when the boats came in from France, or did they act for Hawk in all things? And who had done the dirty deed? Lucien grimaced. He'd made it easy for them, allowing the blacksmith's son to take his horse to the stable. Was the blacksmith's son the culprit? Hell, anyone could have sneaked into the stables and interfered with his mount. They'd all acted as though he was unwelcome; all were equally suspicious. All had refused to meet his gaze, even the English mouse.

She'd behaved more suspiciously than any of the villagers. The more he thought about it, the more convinced he was that the insipid Englishwoman

had secrets. The likelihood seemed high the secrets were related to his enemy, Hawk. There was no other explanation.

Chapter Six

While Mary made small talk with Mistress Baker, Rosalind pretended to study the woman's swollen leg. She ran her hands slowly but steadily down the reddened limb and concentrated on the place inside her mind that helped her heal others. A picture formed, and with it the answers to help Mistress Baker.

"How long has your leg been like this?" she asked, wanting to appear as if she was unsure of the problem.

"Nigh on six months now," Mistress Baker said.

"Did you have a fall?"

"Aye, 'twas in blackberry season. Right clumsy, I be at times. Fell headlong into a bush. I healed up right enough, apart from this leg that flares up now and then."

Rosalind nodded. "I suspect there's still a thorn embedded in your leg, causing the problem."

"No! Couldn't be. I've had a poisonous wound before and 'twern't nothin' like this."

Unsurprised at the woman's denials but sure in her own mind, Rosalind nodded again. "Would you allow me to try a treatment?"

"I've tried everything." Mistress Baker's jowls wobbled as she bobbed her head briskly. "Don't suppose trying a new treatment would hurt none. Not that I'm saying you be right, Lady Hastings. But as I see it, can't be much worse off than I be now."

Rosalind shared a quiet smile with Mary before turning to open her treatment bag. Her hands hovered over various herbs before she selected several and ground them to a paste in a special dish she kept in her bag. "Mix this powder with water and smooth it over your leg. Right here." Rosalind touched a bright red spot with a gentle finger. She studied Mistress Baker for a short time, then reached into her bag again and pulled out a small bottle. "You might try taking this medicine too."

"I don't know 'bout no medicine," Mistress Baker said.

Rosalind understood the problem immediately. “I make it with honey. Try it, you’ll be surprised at how pleasant it tastes.” Mistress Baker remained doubtful, but Rosalind pressed the medicine on her. “I’ll visit you tomorrow if I can, or failing that, expect me the day after.” Rosalind glanced at the discolored limb. If something didn’t happen soon, the woman would lose her leg. She’d seen it happen before. “Mary, perhaps we should ask Mistress Baker for clear directions to the Miller family.”

Mistress Baker chuckled. “Got lost, did ye?”

“We’ll learn our way around soon enough,” Mary said. “The village is not large.”

“Aye, right enough.” Mistress Baker nodded sagely. “I’ll look for you tomorrow or the next day.”

Rosalind and Mary left after receiving detailed directions to the Millers’ cottage.

“I thought Matthew was meant to wait for us,” Mary said, searching for the hefty footman in his distinctive livery.

Rosalind glanced down the rutted lane that ran between the rows of cottages. “The Miller cottage isn’t far. I’m sure Matthew is resourceful enough to find us.”

“But my lord said—”

“Let me worry about Hastings,” Rosalind said, ignoring the twinge of guilt at breaking a promise. She hurried Mary past the stable. A weathered sign swung drunkenly over the porch of the public house next door. Up close, the sign bore the image of a horse’s head, and it creaked with each gust of wind. Raucous laughter spilled from an open bay window.

“What ’ave we ’ere, then?” a man hollered out the window. “Pretty chicks like you shouldn’t be walking alone.”

A second man joined his friend, and Mary grabbed Rosalind forcibly by the elbow. “Miss, this not be the place to stand and gawp.”

Rosalind allowed Mary to drag her away but continued to look over her shoulder. “I’ve never been in a public house before. Have you?”

“Yes, miss. I mean, my lady. I have. And it’s not the place for the likes of you.”

Rosalind frowned. The interesting places weren’t proper. It wasn’t fair. One day she’d march right inside…

Mary slowed when they reached a stone gateway on the outskirts of the village. “This must be the shortcut Mistress Baker mentioned.”

“There’s the dead oak. The path looks overgrown.” Rosalind’s boots sank into mud as she peered down the path. She pulled her boot from the mud with a loud squelch. “And wet.”

“Do you want to go back?” Mary asked.

“No, I’m muddy now and you don’t look much better. We might as well keep going.”

The path twisted and turned, taking them deep into a copse of beech and oak. The leafy canopy blocked the light, making navigating the path even more treacherous. Rosalind pushed on, wincing when icy water from a puddle splashed over the top of one boot.

They walked for another ten minutes before Rosalind paused to rescue her skirts from the clutches of a prickly bush. “I’m not sure this is the right way. Mistress Baker said we needed to follow the path for five minutes. I didn’t see the fork in the path she mentioned. Did you?”

“No, miss. I don’t like it here. Have you noticed there be no birds singing? And it’s getting darker.”

Rosalind frowned. She’d noticed but had decided it was mere imagination. They stared at each other wordlessly.

“Do you think we should return?” There was a distinct wobble in Mary’s voice, and her fear spread to Rosalind. Every nerve in her body screamed, urging flight.

“It can’t be much farther,” Rosalind whispered. Somehow, their surroundings warranted a hushed undertone. She swallowed as she tugged her hat free from a low-hanging branch.

Mary glanced over her shoulder. “If you’re sure…”

No, she wasn’t sure at all. Perhaps it hadn’t been wise to ignore Hastings’s orders to take an escort.

The snap of a dry twig made them both jump.

Mary emitted a soft squeak. “What was that?”

“How should I know?” Rosalind’s skin suddenly prickled with alarm. Another crack sounded and a red deer burst from the undergrowth. It seemed as panicked as they and crashed into the bushes a few feet from them before disappearing.

“A deer,” Rosalind said weakly, pressing a trembling hand to her breast, willing her heart to return to normal speed. “Shall we carry on?”

“Yes, miss.”

They set off again, traveling through the murky light. The sharp crack of a branch made her heart jump up her throat again. Rosalind stilled.

"Miss?"

Rosalind let out a burst of breath. "Probably another deer." She forged ahead, despite the jangle of her nerves. The trees thinned, letting in more light, and with the improved vision, she experienced a rise in courage. She caught a flash of white as a bird flitted from one tree to another. Another tremulous breath eased her wariness a little more.

"Look, Mary. I do believe that is the fork in the path Mistress Baker spoke of." She hurried toward it, desperate to leave the inhospitable forest. "I'm right. It is. There's the marker stone. Mary?" Rosalind turned to smile at her friend.

She wasn't there.

"Mary?" Rosalind peered down the path, but Mary was nowhere in sight. A chill crawled along Rosalind's spine. "Mary!" A muscle ticked at the corner of her mouth. She stood indecisively in the middle of the path and fervently wished she'd listened to Hastings. She hated to admit to the fact, but it seemed he had the right of it. It wasn't safe to wander without an escort.

Rosalind's stomach clenched hard as she fought her rising panic. She retraced her steps. "Mary? Where are you?" The fruitless hunt stoked her fear. Where was her maid? The small hairs at the back of her neck stirred, and her skin grew clammy beneath her gown and cloak as she searched the path and undergrowth. "Mary?" There was no reply. Somehow, her maid had disappeared into thin air, and now she didn't know what to do. "Mary?"

Her mind reeled. She couldn't stand dithering for the rest of the day. Finally, after much internal debate, she decided to forge on to the Millers' cottage. They might help her find Mary. According to Mistress Baker's directions, it must be close. With one final, searching look down the path, she turned and hastened down the right fork, dread nipping her heels. Anxiety increased her speed until she was running, heedless of the mud and water splashing her gown, the branches and twigs that scratched her face and tugged at her cloak and hat.

On the path in front of her, she saw a flash of brown. Another deer, she thought. Masculine shouts filled the air and a gun fired.

Rosalind halted in shock.

Another gunshot exploded through the silence. Bark flew from a beech tree right next to her. A third shot reverberated through the trees, and her hat went flying off her head.

“Don’t shoot!” she screamed, crouching down on the path. “Stop shooting!”

There was silence for a brief moment.

“Over there,” a low, rough voice shouted.

She heard the crunch of dried leaves, the snap of small twigs, and the rustle of the undergrowth. She swallowed, trying to still her trembling limbs. Surely, the men hadn’t mistaken her for a deer?

“Over there.”

The sound of running footsteps crashing through the undergrowth came toward her instead of retreating. Without thinking, Rosalind scrambled behind a bush and burrowed into the midst of another until they hid her from sight.

“I can’t see her.”

“Where did she go?”

Rigid with terror, Rosalind huddled beneath the bush, scarcely daring to breathe. They weren’t hunting deer; they were hunting her.

Rosalind heard the thud of footsteps on the path nearby. A branch dug into her hip, but she was afraid to move in case the men discovered her hiding place.

“She must have gone down the fork in the path.”

Through the screen of green leaves, Rosalind saw a patch of brown cloth. A man passed so close, she smelled his pungent body odor and heard the rasp of his breathing.

“Don’t think we ’it ’er,” he said. “Least ways, there’s no blood.”

“No matter,” the second man replied. “Good fright will do the job. Our man weren’t particular.”

The men’s voices faded, and Rosalind remained crouched until her legs screamed in protest. Cautiously, she stood, searching for danger. The only route of escape was the path back through the forest, and she must hurry before the men backtracked in search of her. She sped along the path, traveling with a minimum of noise. She glanced over her shoulder, terrified the men would sight her and give chase.

“Miss, there you are! I’ve been looking for you.”

“Arghh!”

“Miss Rosalind!” Mary’s arms wrapped around her neck in a stranglehold, squeezing her so tight, Rosalind could hardly draw breath. “I’m so pleased to see you,” Mary sobbed. “Where have you been? I got a stone in my boot and stopped to take it out, and by the time I had my boot back on, I couldn’t see you. I was trying to catch up when someone stuffed a bag over my head and tied up my hands and feet and—”

“Mary,” Rosalind whispered, her tone urgent. The men might appear at any moment. “We haven’t time for discussion. Make haste. There are men searching for me. Mary!” When her maid stared blankly, Rosalind shook her. “Please, we must leave. Now!” She wrenched Mary’s hands from her neck and peered intently at her tear-stained face. “Listen to me. The men have guns. They shot at me.”

Mary’s face appeared the color of milk, and Rosalind realized she hadn’t registered a single word. She snapped her fingers and, when that failed, slapped Mary across the face.

“Ow! What did you do that for? Luckily,” she continued, a stubborn set to her mouth, “I managed to wriggle free of the ropes.”

Rosalind grabbed her forearm and propelled her down the path in the direction of St. Clare village. “Hurry!”

“My head hurts.”

“Worry about that later. I tell you, they were shooting at me. They meant to kill me. I hate to think what will happen if they catch us.”

“I be too young to die.”

“Exactly!” At last, she was getting through. “Make haste.”

A branch hit Rosalind across the face, hard enough to make her eyes water. Each breath rasped through her lungs until a sharp pain jabbed at her side. Hurry! Hurry! Their footfalls sounded horrendously loud in the silent forest. The mud sucked at her feet. She slipped and staggered through a particularly swampy part of the path but her speed barely slackened. After a brief glance to make sure Mary was following, she increased the pace even more.

They burst from the edge of the forest onto the road. The view down the hill to the village of St. Clare looked so normal, Rosalind blinked. She paused, sucking in great drafts of air. Beside her, Mary wheezed, turning alarmingly red in the face.

They both heard the hoof beats at the same time. Alarm shot across Mary’s face while Rosalind braced to run.

“Who is it?” Mary’s voice wobbled, and she sounded as if she might burst into tears again.

“How should I know?” Rosalind knew it wouldn’t take much to push her maid into hysterics. Mary was such an idiot at times. Brave and bawdy one moment, while the next she was a sniveling ninny.

“What are we going to do?”

Rosalind rolled her eyes. Hiding sounded good to her. Before she could make good on the thought, a man leading a horse came into sight.

“It be Hastings!” Mary said.

Hastings stopped dead when he saw them. It wasn’t difficult for Rosalind to imagine what they looked like. She dragged a hand through her frizzy hair and for a moment regretted the loss of her hat.

“Where is your footman?” he demanded.

“How should I know?” Rosalind asked. “In the village, I suppose.”

“I told you not to go anywhere without an escort.” Hastings’s words sounded as if he forced them between his teeth.

Rosalind took a good, hard look at him and stepped back. Although he didn’t take the same care his cousin Charles did with his apparel, he usually looked presentable. Today mud splattered his black breeches, he had a scratch across his cheek that stopped just short of his scar, and several dried leaves clung to his black hair. “What happened to you?”

“Someone meddled with my horse,” he gritted out.

Rosalind froze mid-step. “I was shot at, and someone grabbed Mary and tied her up.”

“I told you it wasn’t safe to wander the estate without an escort. I’ll escort you back to the castle.” Lucien scowled. Someone had shot at her? It sounded like a fine story she’d concocted to placate him. “Tell me about these men who shot at you.”

“I saw only two men, but there may have been three. The trees and undergrowth were so thick it was difficult to tell.”

“And what happened?” He’d see how deep she would dig herself in with lies.

“Mary and I were walking along the path, following Mistress Baker’s directions to get to the Miller cottage. The directions she gave us took us through the forest.” She gestured at the trees behind them. “I thought Mary was behind me, but she wasn’t. I heard something crashing through the

undergrowth. A deer bounded across the path in front of me. The next minute the men arrived, and they started shooting."

"A deer? It sounds as if the men were hunting and you managed to get in the way."

Her chin jerked up. "The men were shooting at me. I heard them say so. And if they were hunting, why did they grab Mary?"

Lucien found himself staring in fascination. Her argument had brought a delicate color to her cheeks while her blue eyes had darkened. They flashed at him, leaving him in no doubt of her feelings. She was furious because he doubted her. He wondered if he were wrong. Perhaps she was innocent.

"It is my feeling," he said, scrutinizing her closely, "that someone wanted me dead. They hoped I'd lose control of Oberon and suffer a fall bad enough to kill me. What have you to say to that?"

"What have I—" She broke off to glare at him. "Come, Mary. I desire a bath." With that, she whirled away and stomped down the slight hill, her maid trailing her.

The maid was limping, Lucien saw as he resumed a slow walk after the two women. Had she lied? She appeared dirty and windblown, but no more so than after a vigorous walk. Then he recalled the absolute disgust when she'd realized he thought she'd made the whole story up, followed by sheer incredulity on her expressive face. Lucien's scar drew tight when he frowned, then slackened when his mouth eased into rueful humor. Ten minutes ago he'd been sure, but now he doubted his first instincts.

He ambled after the women into the village. This time the villagers appeared a mite friendlier, with the children swarming about the two women while the womenfolk bobbed brisk greetings as they went about their business.

When they walked past the public house, a stooped figure limped from the stables. His head was swathed in a grubby white bandage.

"Matthew." Rosalind darted forward before pulling up in consternation. "Whatever happened to you?"

"Aye," the maid chimed in. "We waited for you." She looked him up and down and drew back suddenly. "Have you been drinking?"

Lucien winced at her shrill screech. The footman did too, his hands creeping up to hold his head. A large rip ran the length of his green St. Clare livery, while mud and straw splattered his white stockings. Lucien's

nose twitched when he stepped closer. Along with the pungent aroma of whisky, he smelled the distinct odor of stable manure.

“Have you been sitting in Nag’s Head drinking?” the maid demanded again.

“Shush. Let the man speak.” The English mouse stepped alongside the footman and touched him gently on the upper arm. A small gasp escaped his wife. Lucien sent her a curious glance. The color fled her face, leaving her cheeks pale. “I expect your head hurts, Matthew.” She turned to Lucien. “Is there somewhere Matthew can sit down?”

Lucien snorted. Matthew wouldn’t sit if he had his way. The footman had neglected his duties. He’d be lucky if he kept his job. “Explain,” he said curtly. There were a few too many accidents for his liking. He glanced at Rosalind. Beads of blood on her jaw line snagged his attention. A scratch. Concern welled, taking him by surprise. Pushing aside the unease, he concentrated on the footman. Lucien didn’t want to feel anything for the English mouse.

“I was on my way to meet up with Lady Hastings, just like ye told me.” He paused, saw the look on Lucien’s face and wavered on his feet.

“Sit, man,” Lucien snapped. “Before you fall.”

The footman slumped against one of the wooden pillars at the entrance to the Nag’s Head. “Took a short cut, I did, through the small alley that runs behind the stables. Someone hit me on the noggin. That’s the last I remember.”

Lucien studied the footman, weighing his words.

“Why do you smell like the bottom of a whisky barrel?” the red-haired maid asked.

Lucien bit back amusement. All he needed to do was stand and glower. The maid would ask the questions.

“Hush, Mary. Can’t you see Matthew is in no condition for your questions? We need a wagon or cart to transport him to the castle.”

“A cart?” Lucien said.

His wife drew herself up. “Can’t you see he has a headache? Matthew is in no condition to walk.”

Very well. Lucien’s eyes narrowed at his wife’s tone. He would organize a cart for the footman, but he had every intention of interrogating the man back at the castle.

Chapter Seven

Rosalind hurried down the dimly lit passageway, painfully aware she was very late for dinner. She glanced down at her puce-colored gown and the cream lace ruffles Mary had added at the last moment in an effort to improve the style. Not that she'd had much choice with the gown. Unbelievably, someone had entered her chamber whilst she was asleep and stolen every single item of clothing from her dressing room. The idea of someone watching her during an afternoon nap made her equally uncomfortable and angry. Yes, angry! Uneasiness assailed her every time she spent time in her chamber. It was like the weight of a stare constantly at her back, but now her apprehension was ten times worse. Someone had violated her privacy.

The chime of a clock made her hasten with an inelegant burst of speed. When she turned the corner, she paused to take a deep breath before sailing into the dining room with a pleasant smile fixed to her face.

"I'm sorry I'm so late," she apologized. Bother, she hadn't known they were having dinner guests. Why hadn't someone told her? Mary hadn't known either or she would have informed her.

The gentlemen stood, and Rosalind headed for the lone unoccupied seat. Of course, it was next to Lady Augusta.

Hastings stepped around the table and pulled out the chair for her. Rosalind couldn't help but notice the quick, cursory inspection he gave her gown. Inclining her head in thanks, she slid into her chair while Hastings returned to his seat at the far end of the table. Every muscle in her body tensed when Lady Sophia engaged Hastings in conversation, even though she avoided looking at his flawed face. He leaned closer, and one of Lady Sophia's delicate white hands fluttered out to touch him on the arm. Rosalind gritted her teeth. Why did that woman insist on flirting with her husband?

"What on earth are you wearing?" Lady Augusta asked.

"Looks like one of her maid's gowns," Lady Pascoe said.

Two bright red patches on her cheeks highlighted Lady Augusta's anger. "Are you trying to make the St. Clare family look as if they require funds from the poor-box? That's what the neighbors will think when they see the state of your gown." She spoke in an undertone but still managed to stress her displeasure.

Rosalind inhaled sharply, struggling to hold back the angry words fighting for release. She picked up the glass of wine one of the footmen poured for her. "Someone stole my clothes."

"Stole…Idiotic girl. Why would anyone want to steal your clothes? They are hardly the latest London fashions."

"I have no idea." Rosalind's hand tightened around her wineglass until her knuckles showed white.

Lady Pascoe guffawed loud enough to turn heads. "Stole your clothes," she screeched. "That's the best story I've heard in weeks! Hastings wouldn't buy you new ones, eh?" Chortling loudly, she slapped one hand on the wooden tabletop. "Congratulations! He's going to have to buy you some now."

"Elizabeth." Lady Augusta's displeasure cut her friend off mid-cackle. "This is a family matter. I do not wish the entire village to hear."

"Soup, my lady?"

Rosalind nodded at the footman. He deftly served the turtle soup, allowing her a few moments of peace. This was going to be another difficult dinner.

The moment the footman finished and moved on, Lady Augusta started again. "I found that witch's cat wandering outside my chamber. Your red-haired maid chased it about for fifteen minutes, disturbing my rest. I want the beast gone."

Rosalind's chin jerked up. "Hastings said I might keep it." Lady Augusta's frown didn't diminish, and she thought she'd better try appeasement plus an apology. "I'm sorry the kitten disturbed you. I'll make sure he stays in my chamber in future."

"See you do, or I'll order one of my footmen to drown the filthy beast."

Rosalind sighed, knowing it was best to hold her tongue. She applied her attention to the delicate green soup.

The minute the women left the gentlemen to their port and pipe smoking, Rosalind escaped to the garden. Lady Augusta saw her heading for the door, but Rosalind ignored her summons by pretending not to notice.

Outside in the garden it was blissfully peaceful. Exactly what she needed in order to think about all that had happened this day. The graveled path crunched under her shoes while a light breeze whistled through the garden, rustling leaves in a pleasant musical sound. She passed the formal rose beds and kept walking until she reached a small pagoda overlooking the sea. At this time of night, all she could see was an inky blackness, but the swish of the waves was soothing. She sank onto a padded seat and let out a soft sigh.

"Why did I know I would find you out here on your own?"

Rosalind barely flinched at Hastings's question. On an inner level, she'd known they would meet out here. It was becoming a ritual of sorts, meeting in the garden after dinner.

"I was thinking about the day's events," she murmured, very aware of his scent, his closeness. "What did Matthew say?" In the soft light of the torches, Hastings's face expressed surprise. "I know you talked to him."

Hastings hesitated then sat beside her. His thigh touched hers for an instant before he inched away. "Someone hit him on the head. He says he saw the man's face but didn't recognize him."

Rosalind nodded. That was exactly what she'd read when she'd touched his arm. He hadn't lied. "Do you believe him?"

"The man has a lump the size of a goose egg on the back of his head. It's obvious he hit his head somehow. But he smelled like he'd bathed in whisky. He denies taking a drink. Why are you wearing that God-awful gown?" he asked, changing the subject with a suddenness that startled her.

"Because someone stole every gown from my chamber while I slept." Would he believe her?

"I heard Lady Pascoe's theory. Is she right?"

"No, she's not," Rosalind snapped, incensed he would think such a thing.

"Hmm."

Irritated, she leaped to her feet. "I wouldn't do something like that." Her cousin Miranda would, but the idea of Hastings thinking her capable of such childish schemes upset her. "There is something odd going on, Hastings. Today someone shot at me, Mary was tied up, Matthew was hit on the head, and someone tried to kill you. And when I woke up this evening, I discovered someone had removed every single gown from my dressing room."

Hastings shrugged. “I’m sure there’s a reasonable answer for everything that’s occurred. You interrupted men hunting. And I’m not convinced Matthew is telling the truth.”

He didn’t believe that. Rosalind was convinced of it. If she were to read him, she was sure her theory would hold. She glanced at Hastings and found him staring out to sea. Using her sight was an obvious solution, but did she really want to know his thoughts? Did she want a reminder of how deeply he loved the woman he held inside his heart?

Rosalind nibbled on her bottom lip. Who was the woman? Where was she now? Something awful must have happened to her, or else Hastings would never have married her. But what? Rosalind crept closer to Hastings as she worked up her nerve. She took a deep breath and slowly reached for his forearm and the sliver of tanned skin below his jacket cuff. Without warning, Hastings turned to face her. Her hand hovered in midair before dropping to her side.

They stared at each other for a long time. Rosalind swallowed, a shudder of excitement streaking through her body. This close, she saw his scar in merciless detail. Yet she didn’t notice the puckered, ruined flesh anymore. She saw Hastings.

The man.

His dark eyes bored into hers, trapping her helplessly in his gaze. Rosalind realized she wanted this man, her husband, to love her in the way he loved the dark-haired mystery woman. And if reading him with her sight helped her to learn him, she would touch him and open herself up to possible hurt because there was no other alternative.

This was the way forward to the future she envisioned for herself.

“What are you staring at?” He sounded defensive, and she automatically reached out in the hope of soothing him, her fingers colliding with the back of his hand.

The vision was more powerful with each touch. Crisp and clear, it was like being there. This time, she saw Hastings and the woman riding horses. They wore dusty clothes and maintained a slow pace so it was obviously a journey of some type. Two men rode with them, neither of them familiar to Rosalind.

Suddenly the vision changed. Hastings stood alone in the bow of a boat. Ahead of him, a chalky cliff jutted from the sea. The coast of England. Questions burned at her lips. She scanned his face. The raw and primitive

grief on Hastings's face made her ache to comfort him. She wanted to throw her arms around him and hug him tight. She wanted to tell him all would be well. Feeling like a sneak, she jerked her hand from his warm skin.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, striving for a natural voice.

The glazed look of despair disappeared from his face, replaced by gritty determination. "What are you talking about?"

"Your thoughts didn't look pleasant."

His firm mouth twisted with annoyance. "It was nothing."

"There's something strange happening at Castle St. Clare." Rosalind was determined to persuade him the unusual occurrences weren't the product of her overactive imagination. "What about your accident today? Have you discovered more?"

The flicker of impatience that slid across his face made her teeth grit together. Those men had wanted her dead. She would make him believe—if it was the last thing she did.

"It's time we returned to our guests."

Rosalind planted her hands on her hips, desperate for him to understand. "I'm watched all the time."

"Servants," he drawled with distinct mockery. "The castle is full of them."

"Not in my room." To her annoyance, her hands shook. Rosalind promptly hid them behind her back. "I feel as though I'm being watched every time I'm alone in my room. And before we were married, I was—" She stopped midsentence. It wasn't difficult to see that Hastings thought she was imagining things or, worse, trying to attract his attention by making up tales. She intercepted his sardonic look and instantly her face burned with humiliation.

"Come," he said, clearly impatient. "Our guests await." In a silent order to obey, he offered his arm to escort her back inside the castle.

Both frustrated and irritated, Rosalind wanted to stomp her foot and shout at him for his foolishness. He should listen to her. But instead, she meekly accepted his escort. She'd have to think of another way and soon. Every instinct inside screamed that the escalating pranks would catch a victim before long.

Hastings led her into the Chinese Drawing Room. "Would you like coffee or chocolate?"

“Chocolate, thank you.” Her heart beat a little faster as their gazes met and held. Under his lazy appraisal, the deficiencies in her dress leaped out to taunt her.

“Ah, Hastings. There you are. I’ve been looking for you.” Lady Sophia batted her eyelids at him. “Lady Hastings. How…ah…interesting you look. Would you like me to give you my seamstress’s card? Of course, she’s very expensive but worth every penny, I think.” She smoothed white gloves over her form-fitting blue-and-white gown.

Rosalind’s backbone straightened and a rude word popped into her head. She wished Lady Sophia would cease her prattle and stop rubbing her breasts against Hastings’s arm. Censuring words trembled at the tip of her tongue, ready to spill forth, but Hastings took a half step away from Lady Sophia before she could utter them. The move brought him closer to her.

“Would you like some new gowns?” Hastings’s voice sounded low and husky and sent a shower of tingles shooting through her body.

Anticipation surged through her. Was it her imagination or was Hastings warming toward her? “I—”

“I could come with you,” Lady Sophia butted in. “To help you select the perfect gowns to show off your…ah…coloring.” She turned to simper at Hastings’s chin and blinked rapidly while her mouth curved into an artful smile.

It didn’t take much imagination for Rosalind to visualize the type of gowns she’d end up with if Lady Sophia had her way.

Lady Pascoe thumped to a stop beside them and leaned heavily on her walking cane. “Gel, do you have something wrong with your eyes?” she demanded, squinting at Lady Sophia.

“No, there’s nothing wrong with my eyes,” Lady Sophia said, puzzled.

“Then why do you keep blinkin’ ’em as if you had bugs inside?” As usual, Lady Pascoe hollered.

Rosalind caught her bottom lip between her teeth, trying in vain not to laugh. Two young men standing across the room were not so charitable. Their loud raucous guffaws were contagious, and Rosalind’s gaze dropped to concentrate on an intricate Oriental urn.

“Really,” Lady Sophia snapped.

“And what do you think of your wife’s gown, Hastings? Shocking, ain’t it?”

Lady Sophia simpered. “The color is atrocious.”

“Humph! Wasn’t talking to you.” Lady Pascoe peered up at Hastings, waiting for his answer.

Rosalind froze, her knees knocking together beneath the skirts of the puce dress as everyone in the Chinese parlor collectively waited for his reply.

Hastings slipped his arm around her waist and his mouth curled into an uncharacteristic smile. A sensuous smile that made Rosalind’s breath catch. “My wife has a pure heart.”

The walking stick thumped on the floor. Lady Pascoe’s head bobbed under her powdered wig. “Prettily said, Hastings.”

Several of the dinner guests readied to depart. Rosalind suppressed a yawn.

“Go up to your chamber.” Hastings removed his arm from around her waist, leaving Rosalind bereft.

“Good night.” Rosalind turned and slowly walked to the door.

She couldn’t prevent a glance over her shoulder at her husband, but he was already deep in discussion with Lady Sophia. Simpering ninny! The way she fluttered her eyelashes at Hastings and acted so superior about gowns and the latest fashion irritated her in the extreme. Of course, Lady Sophia thought she knew everything. Rosalind snorted. She wasn’t stupid. Lady Sophia wanted her husband or at least his title. Humph! Not if she had anything to do with the matter.

Then there was Hastings. Rosalind glared at a graceful statue depicting Diana, the huntress. Stubborn man. He’d rejected her warnings to take care even though a child could read the situation with ease.

Rosalind stepped inside her chamber and slammed the door shut. Her sight wasn’t necessary to divine the evil present at Castle St. Clare. It was there for any idiot to see, and if Hastings refused to listen, she’d investigate on her own.

She turned a slow circle, scrutinizing each wall in the flickering candlelight as if she’d never seen it before. Almost immediately, a sense of disquiet inched down her body, as if an unseen person spied on her. Malicious, perhaps dangerous. Her palms grew clammy with tension, but she bit back her fear and forced herself to continue her investigation. Noir, her kitten, crawled out of his basket in the corner. He yawned widely and ambled over to wind around her shaky legs.

Where was Mary? The candles were freshly lit so she couldn't have been gone for long. Then Rosalind remembered that Mary had gone to meet one of the male servants. Rosalind coughed to clear the knot of apprehension in her throat. At this very moment, she craved the sound of another voice and a friendly face. She crouched to scratch Noir behind the ears. Briefly, she considered summoning a maid on some pretext, only to reject the idea. This was something she must do on her own. She gave the kitten a final pat and stood.

Forcing her jumpy nerves away, Rosalind marched to the closest wall to search for anything out of the ordinary. There must be a clue somewhere. She rapped her knuckles on the wall. A dull thud sounded. Rosalind knocked harder and scraped a hunk of skin from her knuckles.

"Ouch." She sucked at the trickle of blood.

On hearing her sound of distress, the kitten padded over and meowed for her to pick him up. Laughing softly, she did as he demanded and he rewarded her with a noisy purr. The small half-drowned kitten she'd picked up off the beach was no longer recognizable. With his healthy appetite, Noir was growing at a rapid pace and getting into mischief.

"Yes, getting into mischief," she said, trying to keep her tone stern, but failing dismally when Noir licked her hand. "I've no idea how you escape from my chamber. Mary swears the door is shut when she leaves."

The kitten meowed in answer.

"Yes, I think Mary is frightened of you." She smoothed one hand over the kitten's glossy black coat. "Mary thinks you're a witch's cat too, because of your extra toes, your yellow eyes and your black coat. Luckily, I've managed to keep the other maids from studying you too closely."

The wind wailed outside. Her candle flickered. In the distance, a shutter banged. Rosalind shivered. Another quick squall pelted the castle, blowing in from the sea without warning. The candle flame fluttered and died, plunging her chamber into darkness.

"Bother." After she'd been pushed from her bed, she'd taken to sleeping with a candle lighting the room. Or trying to. The blessed things kept blowing out. A chill crawled along her arms and a swooping, hollow sensation danced in her stomach. She stumbled to her bed and placed the kitten down out of harm's way, every sense alert. The darkness seemed to pulse and reach for her like a living being. Whispers of evil slithered over her skin, leaving dozens of raised bumps.

A creak drew a loud gasp. Was that a footstep? She swallowed, each breath sounding deafening to her ears. A soft rustle made her freeze. Was that the bed curtains? A footfall on the rug?

Rosalind fumbled her way along the length of the four-poster bed to a walnut dresser. She groped for another candle. Fingers worked like thumbs as she struggled to light the taper.

A loud squeak made her jump. Her head jerked. A breeze whispered against her cheek, and the candle blew out again. Rosalind smelled a whiff of the sea and something else…Tobacco?

Noir's distant meow galvanized her to action. She needed a candle lit. Now.

"I'm not imagining things," she said. "I'm not."

Her hand trembled as she struggled to produce light. Someone was inside the chamber with her. Another meow sounded as the flame on the candle finally flared to life. She held the candlestick aloft, every nerve in her body screaming to run. But she held fast. She intended to show Hastings that the specters at Castle St. Clare were not the product of an overactive imagination. There was mischief afoot and, no matter how terrified, she wanted to prove it.

"Noir? Here, kitty, kitty, kitty." Rosalind crept about her chamber, searching for her pet. He was here somewhere. Right now, she craved contact with him to help steady her jangling nerves.

She searched every corner, under her bed, and in her dressing room. Finally, she came to the only possible conclusion.

Noir was no longer in the room even though she'd shut all the doors earlier.

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A plaintive meow attracted Lucien's attention. He paused in the passage leading to his chamber. A black creature flitted under the oak table in an alcove. Rosalind's kitten. A slow smile spread across his face as the kitten batted a dust mote along the ground. The kitten sidled closer and pounced. His whiskers twitched a second before a sneeze exploded.

Lucien chuckled and scooped the kitten up in one hand, cradling it to his chest and smoothing his thumb over its furry head. A loud purr filled the silent passage.

“I think Rosalind might miss you,” he murmured. The kitten rubbed his head against Lucien’s thumb, silently demanding the stroking recommence.

Lucien strode down the silent passage to Rosalind’s chamber. It was adjacent to his, with a connecting door between the two rooms—a connecting door that remained firmly shut. So much for Lord St. Clare’s hope to bounce a grandchild on his knee. Pain spiked through Lucien’s heart. His unborn child had died along with Francesca. He would never have another child.

He pounded on the door. Footsteps sounded and the door cracked open.

“Hastings.” The gap between the door and the frame widened abruptly. “Hastings,” she repeated, her expression one of amazement and apprehension. Her right hand darted out to smooth her hair. She moistened her lips. “Ah, come in.”

The delicate blush on her cheeks, visible even in candlelight, made him freeze. An internal alarm clanged and his scar tightened as he grimaced. A tick started under one eye. “I’ve come to return your kitten.” He spoke harshly, unable to believe the thoughts darting across the English mouse’s face. Inconceivable! That she’d think…His brows pinched together. Good God. The woman…the last thing he wanted was to bed the scrawny English mouse. “Here.” He thrust the kitten at her.

“Don’t you want children?” she blurted out, taking the kitten without touching him. Her cheeks glowed a fiery red but she met his scowl unflinchingly.

“No! *I do not want children.*”

Judging by the pained look on her face, he’d hurt her feelings. Unable to bear a sudden onslaught of guilt, Lucien retreated and reached the door in two steps. It clicked shut behind him, sounding abnormally loud. He winced. Hell’s teeth! All he’d done was act civilly, and straightaway she’d made assumptions. The English mouse and Lady Sophia both in the same night.

Tension tightened his muscles while anger made him long to strike out—a wall, a man, anything to dispel the strain galloping through his body. His decision to keep a careful watch on his wife no longer seemed wise, not when his attentions made her jump to conclusions. Already, the woman featured too prominently in his thoughts.

He shuddered and started for his room before abruptly changing both his mind and direction. If he retired for the night, he’d have trouble sleeping

or, worse, have nightmares again. He might as well go to the cove and search for smuggler activity. Not all the men wore masks. He wanted to find an inconspicuous place to watch the unloading of a shipment. Hopefully he'd recognize some of the locals who were involved and be able to work out the weakest link—the man he could break or bribe and receive some straight answers about Hawk.

The man had appeared mysteriously six months ago, from what he could gather. There must be someone who knew more. Lucien glanced out a nearby window. Thick cloud shrouded the sickle moon. The night appeared perfect for smugglers, and he was not about to pass up a chance to find the elusive Hawk.

Chapter Eight

“Ah, Lady Hastings. We meet again.”

Rosalind’s head jerked up as a man’s voice cut into her turbulent thoughts. Mr. Soulden. Cousin Charles, she reminded herself.

He sauntered toward her, a slim and fashionable figure in a white shirt, a heavily embroidered lavender waistcoat and matching breeches, his wig a lighter hue of lavender. Quite the gentleman, he should have looked out of place amongst the wild, overgrown hedges and gardens but didn’t.

Rosalind returned his smile even though she’d never felt less like smiling in her life, not since Hastings’s last firm rebuttal five nights ago. His blunt words continued to rattle around inside her head until she wanted to scream. Their underlying sentiment had sliced like a dagger, cutting wounds that went deep. Even now, days later, she wanted to crawl away and tend her injuries in private. She considered waving at Charles and continuing her walk but decided it wouldn’t do to upset the only person who had extended the hand of friendship since her arrival. Now that Mary had found someone, a man she spent her free time with, Rosalind was often alone.

Lonely.

The smile felt stiff and foreign on her lips—more a grimace than anything. It was the best she could manage. She inclined her head in greeting as Charles picked his way around a haphazard bed of purple and white petunias and stopped before her.

“Cousin Charles,” she murmured.

“Might I escort you on a turn about the garden?” The corners of his mouth quirked upward as if inviting her to share in a private joke. “It’s a glorious day.”

Her grimace never faltered. “I’m afraid I’m wandering aimlessly, without real purpose.”

His blond brows arched, and he indicated the drawing materials she held with a languid hand. “May I not help you find the perfect bloom to

paint, the perfect pastoral scene?”

His unfailing good spirits made guilt surface. And even though Rosalind felt like moping alone, she decided to make an effort. “I thought of painting the sea, not that I’m a gifted artist. It is something to do out of doors.”

“I’ve noticed you try to avoid Aunt Augusta,” he said, his smile turning sly.

Rosalind’s gasp was instant and loud in the silence of the garden. “No, I don’t!” The defensive note in her voice drew a frown. It was true. She avoided Lady Augusta as much as she shunned mice. In fact, if the truth be told, she would prefer to face an unpredictable mouse.

“Let me take your drawing materials for you.” Charles tucked her hand in the crook of his free arm and, by common consent, they wandered down an overgrown path that led to the far end of the formal part of the garden.

“I am not avoiding Lady Augusta.” Rosalind broke the silence that had fallen between them. At least she’d done one thing right in her panic to leave the castle without seeing Lady Augusta. Her gloves were in place, protecting her hands against thorns and possible visions.

“I’m not accusing you of anything.” He flashed a grin. “When Aunt Augusta gets in one of her moods, there’s no gainsaying her.”

The irony in his tone jerked Rosalind from dark thoughts of her marriage. Lady Augusta was always in a mood. The woman was cranky and outright obnoxious. Nothing Rosalind did pleased her, which was why she’d escaped outside. “She never snaps at you.”

“You didn’t hear her this morning.”

Rosalind sighed. “Probably after she found me absent.”

“No, she never mentioned you. I was in the firing line today. According to Aunt Augusta, I spend far too much time gadding around the countryside. I need to settle down with someone of her choice. Unfortunately, her choices don’t find favor with me. Last one giggled and the one before had teeth that would look better in a horse.” He shuddered and patted Rosalind’s arm. “Go on, give me a smile. Don’t let Aunt Augusta wear you down.”

His sympathetic words made tears build at the back of her eyes. Rosalind looked down at the gravel path, glad when it narrowed to the point where they could no longer walk side by side. She blinked fiercely. She’d been a fool to think marriage was the answer to her problems. Before

marriage, the dream of children and family was impossible, but now it was equally improbable because Hastings refused to acknowledge her. He was frequently absent from the castle. When present, he chose to ignore her.

The path widened and Charles took possession of her arm again. Unbidden, a tear trickled down her face. It splashed onto Charles's shirtsleeve, immediately followed by another.

"Do you know where Hastings is?" Charles asked.

A sob broke free. "No." As if he'd tell her where he was going.

Charles stopped walking without warning, dragging Rosalind to a halt. He peered at her in astonishment. "Are you crying?"

"No."

"You are. What's wrong?"

Rosalind sniffed. "I'm not crying."

Charles grasped her upper arms and reached out to trace one finger across her cheekbone. The sun glinted on the teardrop sitting on his finger. "Crying, just as I suspected. What's wrong? Would you like me to find Hastings for you?"

"No!"

"No?"

"Hastings is busy. I don't want to bother him."

Charles stepped closer and gently wiped her cheeks with the back of his hand, a soft smile of sympathy on his face. He was close enough for Rosalind to smell him—the faint scent of shaving soap, the rice powder coating his wig, and cloves and cinnamon on his clothes. He drew her closer still until her cheek rested on his waistcoat, the silver embroidery scratchy against her skin. His hand smoothed down her back. After resisting for an instant, Rosalind relaxed into his comforting embrace.

"From what I hear, marriage is not an easy thing. Since his return from Europe, I have found George changed."

"Don't you mean Lucien?" Rosalind asked.

Charles chuckled. "Yes, of course. Lucien, as he prefers to be known."

Rosalind sniffed and pulled away enough so she was able to see Charles's face. "How has he changed? What was he like as a boy?"

"I arrived at Castle St. Clare after my parents died in a carriage accident. St. Clare and Lady Augusta treated me like another son, and Hastings and his best friend, Viscount Mansfield, treated me like a brother. The three of us were inseparable, always in scrapes but always a threesome.

We went on our Grand Tour together. St. Clare hired a tutor, and the three of us started on our big adventure."

As Rosalind watched, Charles seemed to drift back into the past. She touched his arm to regain his attention. "What happened?" Although she'd heard rumors, she needed facts from someone who knew firsthand.

Charles blinked the past away. "We were in Italy. After spending time in Florence, we traveled down the coast, intending to visit the ruins at Pompeii. We were in Naples at a tavern. Mansfield and I decided to leave early and return to our rooms. Our tutor came with us, but Hastings had met a woman and he stayed. It was a huge joke to us all." He paused and coughed. "Not fit for a woman's ears, really."

"Go on," Rosalind urged. "Please, I'd like to know."

"It was a contest between us, as most things were. A game."

"A contest about women?"

A trace of red flirted with his cheekbones and he grinned crookedly. "Ah, yes. Hastings wanted to win. He and Mansfield were always very competitive."

"So he stayed on at the tavern."

"We never saw him again. None of us worried until late the next afternoon. We searched for days. The woman was the last person to see him. We questioned her but she was unable to help. They spent most of the night together, parting in the early hours of the morning when it was still dark. It was as if he'd disappeared off the face of the earth."

"Were the people in the tavern questioned? The woman's servants?"

"Everyone. For almost a month we searched the area, describing Hastings, but he'd vanished."

Rosalind frowned. "I don't understand how he arrived back at Castle St. Clare."

Charles took her arm and they walked through a crumbling stone archway into the wilderness outside. The blue of the sea was visible, and the muted thunder of waves beating at the cliff base became audible.

"I'm not sure Hastings knows. He doesn't remember what happened, and he's tight-lipped about where he was before returning to St. Clare. As I said, he's changed. He's no longer outgoing and cheerful. I'm not sure I've seen him smile since his return. He's distant, not just with me, but with Mansfield too, and he's known Mansfield since the cradle. We used to do everything together. And now we don't."

A silence fell between them as they strolled along the path, each deep in their own thoughts. Rosalind wondered what had happened to Hastings. After seeing his scar, it was obvious he'd been attacked and injured, but what else had happened to cause an outgoing man to change so much?

"He doesn't want marriage with me."

Charles stopped in the middle of the path, a frown on his face. In the heartbeat before he spoke, Rosalind heard the call of a sea bird and the buzz of a bee collecting pollen from the profusion of nearby flowers. Miserably, she focused on the sounds to counteract her embarrassment.

His fingers tipped up her chin, forcing her to look at him. "I'm sure you're mistaken."

"No, he tried to call off the wedding before the ceremony." The words burst from her, once her initial shock faded. "And now he ignores me. I'll never have children."

Charles's mouth fell open. He blinked. "You mean…?"

Rosalind lifted her shoulders in a wretched shrug, color scorching her cheeks.

"Oh." Charles cleared his throat. "Give it time. Hastings has much to deal with these days."

"Maybe." She didn't believe time would heal the breach between them without help. Charles hadn't heard Hastings last week. There wasn't a doubt in her mind. Hastings had meant it when he said he didn't want children.

"I'm sure I'm right. Ah, I believe this is the perfect spot for you to capture the vista. What do you think?" He stopped by a stone wall.

Rosalind nodded, hardly caring where she set herself up to draw. In truth, she wanted to think, not paint. She needed to decide how to cope with Hastings, with Lady Augusta, the mystery of her disappearing clothes, and that was just the start.

Like it or not, she and Hastings were married. She must make some sort of life for herself.

Charles set her drawing materials on top of a flat stone. "Can I do anything else for you before I leave? Help you set up?"

Rosalind forced a cheerful smile but remained chilled inside. "Thank you, Cousin Charles. I'll be fine on my own. Will you be here for dinner?" The idea of his company at the dinner table appealed, especially if they were to dine without company tonight. A shudder worked its way down her

spine when she imagined Lady Augusta's pointed remarks and fault-finding, along with Hastings's silence and scowls. Cousin Charles's lighthearted company helped immensely during the longwinded dinners.

"Mansfield is home from London, dancing attendance on his mother. We're attending a puppet show in Whittlebury. Lady Sophia and Lady Radford are organizing the outing. No doubt Mansfield will arrive at Castle St. Clare for dinner. He has had some interesting experiences. He returned to Italy for a time and traveled to the East, to Constantinople. Sultan Abdul Musa befriended him after Mansfield saved the sultan's brother from a runaway horse that almost trampled him. Mansfield's stories of life in the sultan's palace are…colorful," Charles ended with an embarrassed splutter.

"I look forward to meeting him." Rosalind hid her amusement. He meant the tales were not suitable for a lady's ears.

Charles grinned. "You'll like Mansfield. Most people do. Would you like to go to Whittlebury with me?"

And give Lady Sophia another shot at ridiculing her dress? Rosalind shook her head. Not until the dressmaker completed her gowns. "I'll see you tonight."

"All right." With a quick wave, Charles sauntered away.

Rosalind frowned as she watched him depart. And sighed, feeling sorry for herself. Why wasn't Hastings more agreeable, like his cousin?

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"Lady Augusta wants you."

The rough male voice almost two hours later startled Rosalind. She leaped off her perch on the stone wall, her hand fluttering to her breast. The footman waited in silence, his face impassive. She studied the intelligent glint in his brown eyes before deciding against a plea to tell Lady Augusta he couldn't find her. She frowned. If she refused to return to the castle, he'd probably escort her by force. He looked the sort to follow orders.

Heaving a resigned sigh, Rosalind packed up her drawing materials. Lady Augusta had trapped her neatly this time. "Where will I find Lady Augusta?"

"In the Blue Drawing Room."

Rosalind inclined her head. "Thank you." She walked past the South Tower and into the courtyard. The squeaking of leather shoes and the rustle

of fabric indicated that the footman followed her. She stopped and turned to fix him with a haughty stare. “I know where the Blue Drawing Room is located.”

“Lady Augusta bade me escort you right to her.” His expression remained blank, although goodness knows what the man was thinking. Lady Augusta was treating her like someone lacking in wits.

Rosalind’s chin jerked up. “I’ll change my gown before I attend Lady Augusta.”

The footman proved equally stubborn. “Lady Augusta said immediately.”

While they engaged in a duel of wills, Hastings appeared in the courtyard. A thrill of anticipation struck Rosalind unexpectedly hard, and her mouth dried as though she’d eaten too much pickled meat. Was her husband going to acknowledge her this morning? She swallowed, fighting to hold her emotions in check. Or would he walk right past her, treating her like an unfortunate encumbrance?

“Good morning, Hastings.” Rosalind decided to take a stand. He was her husband whether he liked it or not. She halted in front of him so he would need to step around her to avoid knocking her to the ground.

He stopped inches away. His dark eyes narrowed although she thought she saw a flicker of surprise, and perhaps approval. A tic kicked to life at the bottom of his scar.

Rosalind watched in fascination, the pulsing of the muscle right near his firm mouth. “Good morning,” she prompted again. Her heart skipped a beat at her daring, at the strange flash of emotion in his dark eyes. She’d be lucky if he didn’t imprison her in the North Tower with the ghost if she kept this up.

“What are you doing?”

Rosalind suspected he was asking why she was blocking his way, but she pretended ignorance. Instead, she shot an aggrieved look at the silent footman by her side. “Lady Augusta has summoned me.”

One dark brow rose and his mouth curled upward at the very edges. “Best hurry then, before she takes it out on the footman.”

That was a definite smirk. Bother the man. He’d hit on the one thing that would make her hasten to the appointment. Still, she was reluctant to leave without a few words from her husband. Without thought, she reached out to touch his hand. “Your friend Mansfield is coming for dinner tonight.

I’m looking forward to meeting him. I’ve heard so much about him from Charles.”

Hastings didn’t reply. The picture that formed in her mind was not the one she expected. She’d anticipated a vision of Charles and perhaps another man—Mansfield. Instead, the image was dark. Apprehension prickled her skin. Her gaze shot to Hastings. His distant, unfocused expression mirrored her confusion.

A faceless figure prowled Hastings’s mind with a sinister menace. Rosalind exhaled slowly. Was this the same man she read in the villagers’ minds when she treated their ailments? The one they called Hawk?

Hastings shrugged, snapping the fragile contact she held with his mind. “I have things to do.” His gaze narrowed further as he waited for Rosalind to move. Hiding her hurt, she did as he silently bid, her mind too full of unanswered questions to challenge him again.

She stepped inside the Great Hall, trailed by her silent sentry.

“Where is that dratted footman?” Lady Augusta’s screech echoed down the passage, exploding into the Great Hall with the force of a nor’easter.

There was nothing for it. Rosalind had to face Lady Augusta. The footman mustn’t suffer a punishment because of her reluctance. Rosalind sailed into the blue salon to meet with her nemesis.

“There you are! Where have you been, girl? And what are you wearing?” Lady Augusta’s voice rose even higher, if that were possible, her gray eyes snapping with anger while her mouth wrinkled up like an old apple left out in the sun. Before Rosalind answered, Lady Augusta’s gaze cut to the silent footman. “I told you to bring her immediately. Tell Tickell your next half day is cancelled.”

A horrified gasp escaped from Rosalind, and for the first time she saw a flash of irritation on the footman’s face. “It’s not fair to punish him. It’s my fault he took so long. I was way out by the Tower Garden. Then, on the way back, I stopped to talk to Hastings. The butler mustn’t punish him on my account.”

“Go,” Lady Augusta ordered the footman. “And don’t forget to see Tickell.”

Aghast, Rosalind could only stare at the elderly woman in front of her. She decided to countermand the order later. “How can I help you, Lady Augusta?”

“Where is that maid of yours? I told her to go to the village seamstress and come back with two suitable gowns for you. You can’t continue wearing the rags you’ve donned the last few days.” Her mouth pursed in a pained grimace as she flicked a gaze at the offending gown. “Where is she? I expected her back at least an hour ago.”

“Mary and I visited the seamstress at the beginning of the week to order gowns. She’s busy with orders for the Mansfield ball.”

“Which we are attending,” Lady Augusta snapped. “You can’t go in a gown such as the one you wore last night. You’ll make us a laughingstock. Your maid dresses better than you do. It’s no wonder Hastings spends so much time away from Castle St. Clare.”

Grief lanced through Rosalind at the cruel reminder, but Lady Augusta spoke the truth. Hastings refused to spend time with her. So whom did he spend his time with? The lady who inhabited his memories?

“Pour the chocolate, girl.” Lady Augusta’s abrasive tone jerked her from her sorry thoughts. “Where is your maid? You haven’t told me. Speak up.”

The dainty china bowls rattled as Rosalind arranged them on the walnut table next to Lady Augusta. “I haven’t seen her since she helped me dress this morning.”

“Discipline, girl! That’s the only thing they understand. If I find she met with a man instead of hurrying back, there’ll be trouble. Servants need discipline.”

Rosalind disagreed but knew better than to argue. She picked up the pot of chocolate and poured it into two bowls. She placed one within Lady Augusta’s reach.

“Pass the sugar, girl!”

“Yes, Lady Augusta.”

She picked up the sugar bowl and held it toward Lady Augusta.

“Two lumps.”

Rosalind sighed and followed the order. When she was about to place the sugar bowl down, Lady Augusta seized her hand.

“Another lump.”

A haze of red and white swirled through Rosalind’s mind. The red seeped through the white like drops of blood. She shivered involuntarily, feeling as if she was walking through a patch of cold fog. The fog cleared to show children—Hastings, but a younger Hastings who laughed and

gamboled over the sand with others chasing him. The fog swirled, rearranged then cleared in a different place, and Rosalind came face to face with herself. A soft gasp escaped. She wrenched her hand away, jolting the sugar bowl and scattering lumps in all directions.

"You stupid girl," Lady Augusta barked. "Ring for a maid."

Rosalind backed away, blindly reaching for the hand bell to summon a servant. Lady Augusta worried about the future, about the continuation of the St. Clare line. And she was in pain—severe pain that she hid behind her irascible disposition.

This presented a quandary. Everything inside her wanted to reach out and help, but how could she, and keep her gift secret at the same time?

She returned to where Lady Augusta sat in an upright chair. Cubes of sugar crunched, breaking into crystals beneath each of her steps.

"Stand still, girl. You're making a mess."

"Yes, Lady Augusta," Rosalind said, her mind busily thinking of ways to help the elderly woman without attracting attention to herself.

Lady Augusta snapped instructions to the maid. She disappeared and returned a short time later with a broom in hand.

"Out of the way, girl!" Lady Augusta flashed an irritable look in Rosalind's direction.

Rosalind suppressed a sigh. There was no winning with Lady Augusta. Everything she did was wrong.

"Is that maid back yet?" the elderly woman barked. "You there! I'm talking to you. Has Lady Hastings's maid returned from the errand I sent her on?"

"No, my lady."

"Where is the dratted girl?"

"I'm sure there is a reasonable explanation." Rosalind kept her voice low and soothing.

Lady Augusta let out a snort that sounded like an impatient horse. "I'll want to hear it."

Rosalind sank onto a chair, well out of the maid's way, and sipped her chocolate. She wondered if Lady Augusta had finished with her and when she might escape.

The maid swept up the sugar, bobbed a curtsey and hurried from the room, leaving Rosalind alone with Lady Augusta. Rosalind took another sip of her chocolate, waiting for Lady Augusta to speak. The silence drew out

until she felt like screaming. She inched forward on her chair, her left hand clenching and unclenching in the folds of her skirt.

"You're not going to bring Hastings to heel the way you're going about things."

Rosalind started. The bowl almost bounded from her hands, splattering chocolate on her skirts. A dry chuckle burst from the elderly lady. Rosalind righted the bowl, both humiliated and resentful. She didn't need Lady Augusta to tell her something was wrong. Her mouth tightened as she glowered at the woman.

"Good to see you have some backbone. I was beginning to wonder. I've instructed that maid of yours to return with two gowns and ordered the seamstress to hurry the others. You'll have a decent gown to wear to dinner tonight. Give Lady Sophia some decent competition. That's if your maid decides to return today. Meantime, I want you to go over the menus with me." Lady Augusta paused, an expectant look on her lined face. "Well, what do you say?"

"Ah, yes. Thank you, Lady Augusta."

The elderly woman fixed her with a steely glare. "You must win over Hastings."

"Yes, Lady Augusta."

"Time we had St. Clare offspring running about the castle again."

Rosalind winced. Was she that obvious? How did Lady Augusta know it was her dearest wish to hold a child to her breast, to smooth the soft down of its head and shower enough love to make him or her grow into a healthy adult? Hastings's child. An excited tingle speared from her breast to her belly at the thought. Yes, she wanted her husband to give her a child.

"Surprised you, did I?" A dry cackle sounded. "I'm not so old that I don't remember what it's like for the blood to run hot with passion. Are you listening to me?"

"Yes, Lady Augusta," Rosalind said hastily, heat flooding her cheeks. When she dared meet Lady Augusta's gaze again she noticed the imperceptible tightening of lips. The elderly woman required a tonic. She hoped Mary would have some idea of how to get her to drink a potion without raising suspicions. "Shall we start on the menus? Cook will want them as soon as possible."

By the time they finished going over the menus to Lady Augusta's satisfaction, a full two hours had passed.

“Ring the bell for Tickell. Tell him to send for Hancock. I am weary and wish to rest.”

Rosalind rose with alacrity and made haste before Lady Augusta gave her another chore.

“See if your maid has returned. She’d better be back if she knows what’s good for her.”

Rosalind reached for the doorknob, half expecting Lady Augusta to call her back. She jerked the door open and almost leaped through in her hurry to leave. Their menu-planning session had left her with a pounding head, and it hadn’t done much for Lady Augusta’s temperament either.

A maid hovered a few feet from the door, making Rosalind suspect her of eavesdropping. The amused glint in the maid’s dark eyes confirmed her suspicions.

“Has Mary returned from her errand yet?” Rosalind’s words wiped the smirk from the maid’s face and raised guilt in her. She sounded like Lady Augusta.

“I haven’t seen her.” The maid tossed her head. “But she may have returned while I was doing the library.”

Rosalind nodded. “Lady Augusta wishes the services of her maid. Please inform Tickell.”

Once the servant left, Rosalind hurried away to check her chamber. As the maid had said, it was possible Mary had returned with the gowns and gone straight to Rosalind’s chamber to hang them so the creases dropped out.

“Mary?” Rosalind pushed the chamber door shut behind her. “Mary, are you here?”

Silence greeted her call. Rosalind stepped into the dressing room to collect the cloak Mary had lent her and came to a stunned halt.

Six gowns hung on hooks where this morning there were none. But they didn’t look like the gowns she and Mary had ordered from the seamstress.

A slow smile curved Rosalind’s lips. They were gorgeous, gowns of the like she’d never seen before, with matching petticoats. And the colors! She picked up the closest gown and couldn’t resist holding it to her body, despite the risk of marking it. Oh, it was glorious, the blue and gold fabric soft and feminine. She buried her nose in the silk, savoring the scent of new cloth.

A delighted giggle bubbled up her throat. There were five more, each so beautiful she'd have trouble choosing which gown to wear tonight. Rosalind whirled about, swinging the gown with her. The fabric rustled as though she were dancing. She couldn't wait to see Hastings's face when he saw her in one of her new gowns. And to thank him, for it must have been his doing. For once, she'd show to advantage. She would look beautiful.

Chapter Nine

The dinner hour approached, and Mary was still missing.

As darkness drew in, Rosalind paced her chamber, clutching her kitten for comfort while worry stung her flesh like hundreds of angry bee stings. Her hand stilled on top of Noir's head. Despite Lady Augusta's conviction, Mary wasn't the type to run off with a lover. Puzzlement gnawed at her, along with anxiety.

Mary's whereabouts remained a mystery. She'd returned to the castle with the gowns, hung them in the dressing room and disappeared with not a soul seeing her. Repeated questioning of servants had produced no answers. No one had seen Mary since early this morning.

A tap at her chamber door, just as a clock chimed the hour, announced the arrival of a maid. Maybe she would have news of Mary. With optimism surging inside, Rosalind set Noir down and bade her to enter. One glance at the woman and her hopes plummeted. Mary was still absent. Forcing a smile, she submitted to the maid's attentions and fretted, trying to think what else she could do. Even though she hadn't seen as much of Mary recently, her friend was the one constant in her topsy-turvy world. Selfish reasons aside, concern for Mary's safety filled her. No matter what anyone said, this wasn't characteristic behavior for her friend.

Time crept past as the maid styled her hair, applied a patch to the right of her mouth and helped her dress. Finally, she smoothed the lustrous pink silk of Rosalind's gown, coaxing a tuck into obedience, flicking a piece of lace on her sleeve.

"You look right nice in that dress." The sturdy girl stood back to survey her handiwork. "The color suits you. Should I come back later to help you get ready for bed?"

"Thank you, Janet, but I'm sure Mary will return soon."

Janet bowed her head and curtsied, but not before Rosalind witnessed the clear doubt in her round face. Everyone believed the stories of a lover.

Outside, the sun slipped from sight. A stiff breeze blew in from the sea, rattling loose shutters and shooting cool drafts about the castle. Clearly, a storm was on the way. Apprehension eroded all the pleasure she'd felt on donning one of her new gowns. Mary wouldn't willingly face the biting wind and rain, especially with her grumbles about the dangers of fresh air.

In the distance, a clock chimed the next hour, reminding her of the need to hurry. She scooped Noir off the dresser and placed him on the floor.

"Thank you, Janet. Will you make sure my chamber door is closed when you leave?"

Janet's gaze speared to Noir. Her mouth compressed, but she nodded. "Aye, my lady."

Rosalind's silk skirts rustled as she hurried down the passage. When she entered the Chinese Drawing Room, guests were still arriving. Lady Augusta beckoned her immediately with an imperious gesture of her hand. "What was in that tonic you sent for me?"

"A recipe my grandmother taught me." Rosalind fought the need to roll her eyes. Good grief. She'd wanted to help. Why was Lady Augusta telling her off?

"Ah, Hastings." Lady Augusta summoned her nephew from a discussion with Charles.

Rosalind blinked, momentarily speechless. Was that a smile on her face?

Hastings sauntered to a halt beside Rosalind. Dark locks were styled in loose curls on his shoulders, contrasting with the pale blue waistcoat he wore with black breeches and jacket. His inscrutable dark eyes skimmed her face and traveled down her body.

A tremor raced through Rosalind, the air whooshing from her lungs. His gaze caressed her and felt like a handful of soft petals brushing her skin. She imagined his hand trailing down her body instead of his gaze. And in that moment, she wanted to touch him so much, her hand tingled beneath her pink gloves. Every time he looked at her, her heart leaped in response, yet the awareness of his masculinity, his strength, tied her insides in knots of confusion.

"You will escort your wife to dinner," Lady Augusta commanded, jerking Rosalind from her illicit thoughts. "Introduce her to Mansfield."

"Yes, Aunt."

Rosalind glanced in the direction Lady Augusta indicated with a flutter of her fan. A large man, tall and solid, stood on the other side of the parlor near a display of Oriental etchings. Cousin Charles held up his quizzing glass and minced three steps before whirling to speak to the man. The blond man threw back his head and roared with laughter at Charles's antics.

"Go on," Lady Augusta snapped, striking out with her fan to emphasize her order. "Before Tickell rings the dinner bell."

Hastings's expression never changed. "Shall we?" He offered his escort to Rosalind.

Thoughts of her husband had rattled her so much, the protective gloves she wore were a blessed relief. A chance to block her gift and know her mind would remain free of visions. Forcing her worries for Mary's safety away, she placed her trembling hand on Hastings's arm and strolled at her husband's side, her head held high with pride.

Lucien thought he'd managed to hide his shock at Rosalind's appearance. Tonight, his wife looked like a graceful bird instead of a small brown mouse. The pink gown lent color to her cheeks and made her blue eyes sparkle. He felt, rather than saw, the admiration from the male guests. He slowed his steps and moved her closer to his side. Immediately, a delicate scent assailed him, bringing to mind the rose garden on a lazy summer afternoon.

"Lady Hastings. You look good enough to eat."

Lucien couldn't help but tense at the admiration in his cousin's voice and, judging by her puzzled glance, his English mouse noticed his reaction.

"Cousin Charles." Rosalind swept into a low curtsey. "Thank you."

"Lady Hastings, may I present Viscount Mansfield? You've heard me speak of our childhood friend, Mansfield."

The man, supposedly his friend, bowed over his wife's hand. Try as he might, he had no recollection of Mansfield. The childhood memories Charles described were like mist, opaque yet insubstantial.

Mansfield straightened, lust flashing beneath the polished veneer. It was gone so quickly Lucien wondered if he'd imagined the reaction. He scowled, his frame tightening with inner tension. If Mansfield thought to flirt with his wife, he could think again.

"Steady, cuz." Charles wore an amused smile. "Friend."

Lucien blanked his face, but too late. Drat the woman. He didn't want to think about her, and yet he couldn't rid himself of the possessive urges that

had surfaced without warning.

“I’m pleased to meet you at last, Lady Hastings. If I’d known how beautiful and charming you were I wouldn’t have dallied in London for so long.”

Lucien curled his arm around Rosalind’s slender waist in a proprietary statement. “Mansfield.”

“Hastings.” Humor lurked in his eyes. “Are you keeping your wife prisoner in the castle? The local rumor mill—”

“You shouldn’t rely on gossip,” Lucien cut in without a trace of nuance.

Mansfield gave an arrogant nod and eyed Rosalind with a speculative lift of brow. “So I see.”

What the hell did that mean? Lucien might not remember his childhood friend, but he recognized a wolf when he saw one. A wolf who was ogling his wife’s attributes. Lucien winged a dark glare at the man, one that promised retribution should he continue.

“Good evening, Hastings,” a soft feminine voice cooed.

Rosalind stiffened at his side, the obvious distaste in her expression so in tune with his own thoughts Lucien almost laughed. Lady Sophia might flirt with him, but she didn’t truly like him and never met his gaze. It was obvious his scarred visage offended her sensibilities. Still, Lady Sophia’s artless chatter provided insightful clues in his search for Hawk. He’d learned which of the local aristocracy purchased goods from the smugglers, who ordered tea, tobacco, brandy or French silk. After receiving the information from Lady Sophia, he’d questioned several of the landowners, but none of them knew Hawk’s true identity. In truth, Lucien didn’t think any of them cared so long as they continued to receive the luxuries they desired with minimum fuss. He’d discovered that the landowners deposited money at a specified place on a certain night, and the next morning they’d find goods on their doorsteps—every step of the transaction took place at a distance. So he didn’t want to alienate Lady Sophia too much. After his previous setdown when she’d tried to trap him into kissing her, he was lucky she still spoke to him. “Lady Sophia.”

“Hastings, I wanted to discuss my purchase of a new mount. I’m sure Lady Hastings can spare you for a few minutes.”

“Perhaps after dinner, Lady Sophia,” Rosalind said. “Tickell will ring the dinner bell soon.”

She was trembling, although none of the others noticed. He wondered at her possessive manner, especially since his previous behavior had been little short of rude. His gaze drifted over her pert nose and onward to soft pink lips. The drift of color to her cheeks made him smile. Rosalind hid quiet dignity and a caring nature beneath her reserve, and he couldn't help but admire her for it.

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Thunder crashed, reverberating throughout Rosalind's chamber. A fork of lightning lit the night sky before Janet, who was still substituting for Mary, slammed the shutters across the windows to close the storm out. "Will you need anything else tonight, Lady Hastings?"

Rosalind noted the tinge of color on the maid's cheeks, the way she picked up her hairbrush and put it down only to fondle a blue-and-silver hair ribbon. She was like a bird craving freedom from a cage, restless and eager to fly.

"Are you meeting Tom tonight?" Before dinner, the maid had told her about the man who was courting her.

"Yes, my lady." She hugged herself, the sparkle in her eyes making Rosalind even more miserable. Why couldn't Hastings court her?

Rain lashed against the shutters. The wind roared its fury. Rosalind glanced down at her hands. She didn't want to be alone. She could order the maid to stay. After all, what fool would venture outside in weather like this? She sucked in a deep breath and turned to Janet, about to tell her she required her services tonight. Another glimpse of her sparkling eyes, the softly flushed face and clear impatience to leave made Rosalind's shoulders slump. *A fool in love—that's who would brave the elements.*

She couldn't do it. It wasn't the maid's job to quell the monsters that haunted both Rosalind's chamber and her mind.

"No, Janet, I won't need you again this evening."

The maid nodded and skipped to the door. "Good evening. Sleep well."

Rosalind fixed a smile to her lips and concentrated on ignoring the apprehension spreading through her body. She still couldn't believe Mary would willingly face this storm, even if Janet intended to go out in the icy elements. "Have a lovely time."

“Thank you, Lady Hastings.” A quick grin stretched across Janet’s face before she disappeared from sight, the heavy wooden door closing with a soft thud, leaving Rosalind alone.

Again.

Rosalind rose from the stool in front of her looking glass. Where was Mary? No matter what Lady Augusta and the others said, Mary wouldn’t run off without a word. Tomorrow she’d ask questions in the village and perhaps organize a search.

A loud crash, almost overhead, made her wince. The promised storm had arrived with vengeance. She hoped Mary was somewhere dry and warm.

Rosalind padded to her bed and climbed in. Sleep, she thought. Sleep and forget about Hastings, although tonight he’d been very attentive to her. Was she wrong to wish for more? The yearning for a loving partnership and children was like a fist squeezing her heart. Rosalind ached for Hastings’s love, his friendship.

The candle flickered out and the room settled into darkness. Rosalind punched her pillow, lay back and pulled the covers over her shivering body. Her pulse raced unaccountably, as it often did when she was alone in her chamber. A shiver swept her body. Malignant eyes watched again. For several days now, watchful eyes followed her every action. It didn’t seem to matter what time of the day or night. Then there was the mystery of her disappearing gowns…

Rosalind frowned into the darkness. The appearance of the new gowns was a mystery too. She’d meant to ask Hastings but hadn’t managed to find the right time during dinner, not when Lady Sophia was monopolizing his attention.

The sensation of someone watching her heightened. Rosalind sat up abruptly. Licking her lips, she stared into the darkness, searching for the unknown entity that stalked her, that watched and waited until she questioned her sanity. Rosalind strained to hear the slightest noise to prove she wasn’t going mad, but she could hear nothing above the groaning wind and rain.

Ignoring the pounding heart and the smothering unease, she lay back and resolutely closed her eyes.

A mistake.

Imagination took flight, growing with each rattle of thunder. Rosalind gasped, bounding upright in the bed. The back of her neck prickled. The small hairs on her arms and legs stood to attention.

A sound that could have been a footstep hiked her heartbeat to a gallop.

"Who's there?" Her voice sounded tiny and scared. Rosalind swallowed, the noise loud to her ears. She fumbled for the bell-pull and tugged frantically. She wanted a candle. Not knowing what loomed in the inky black darkness was worse than being able to see the threat face to face. "Noir? Here, kitty."

An eternity later, a brisk tap sounded on her door.

"Come in," Rosalind called.

The door opened and a light flickered, illuminating a maid's face. "Can I get you something, my lady?"

"There seems to be a draft. My candle blew out."

The maid surged forward. "I'll light it for you."

"Thank you." With the maid's reassuring presence, Rosalind's terror eased. The flickering light of the candle was infinitely welcome. Where was Noir? She couldn't see her kitten anywhere and desperately needed his comforting presence. He'd developed a habit of hiding and pouncing at her ankles when she least expected it.

"Will that be all, my lady?"

Rosalind resisted the cowardly urge to order the maid to stay, at least until she'd found her kitten. After a pause, she acknowledged the truth. The fewer people who knew about Noir's extra toes the better. "Yes, thank you. That will be all."

The maid curtsied and withdrew. It was best. She couldn't allow fear to rule her life. She slid from the canopied bed and picked up the candle. Holding it aloft, she walked the perimeter of the chamber, searching for a clue to prove she wasn't sinking into madness.

There! There on the Persian rug. A trail of sandy footprints.

Rosalind didn't think twice. She raced from her chamber, heading for Hastings's adjoining room. In the early days of their marriage, she'd tested the connecting door between their rooms. Hastings kept it locked. She hammered on his door and waited. Nothing happened. She glanced over her shoulder. Was that something moving behind her? Deciding not to wait and find out, she opened the door and burst through. Something—Noir—streaked in front of her. Rosalind toppled to the ground with an unladylike

grunt while her kitten scampered out of the room. The candle snuffed out when the holder hit the ground, leaving her in darkness.

"Ouch," she muttered, rubbing at her knee with one hand.

"What the hell? Who's there?" Hastings sounded belligerent and annoyed at the disruption.

"Me," Rosalind said in a small voice as a candle flared to life. At least he was here for a change. She scrambled to her feet, mortified to realize she'd pulled up her nightgown to rub her bare knee. What must he think of her?

"What the devil are you doing in my room?" He sat up to lounge against the pillows, watching her with his dark eyes.

Rosalind's chin lifted on hearing his tone. "Someone was in my bedroom."

"A servant," he said, holding up his left hand to inspect his fingernails.

Her eyes narrowed at the nonverbal slap. "Do you think I'm stupid?" The words tripped from her tongue before she could stop them. She stomped to the bed, and her hand snaked out to seize his arm. "Come with me," she ordered. "I'll show you."

The intimacy of the moment exploded on her conscience all at once. Warm, naked skin pulsed beneath her touch. She averted her gaze, positive every sinful thought racing through her head showed on her face, and jerked her hand from his muscled arm before her gift shattered the intimate moment.

"Would you like me to dress first?"

Rosalind's eyes shot to his chest. She had no idea how she'd missed the broad expanse of bare skin. Fascinated, her gaze wandered from the solid slab of muscle, up over the bulge of his biceps to his strong neck. Heat converged on her cheeks, but she was unwilling to halt her visual exploration.

"Rosalind?"

Rosalind looked up, met his gaze and quivered, helplessly trapped in the moment. She couldn't look away. She didn't want to look away.

Hastings swung his legs over the edge of the bed. Rosalind followed the movement. Long legs sprinkled with dark hairs…No clothes!

"Still feeling brave, Rosalind?"

Her heart thumped frantically against her ribs. She felt like a child who'd run about playing in the garden until she collapsed in exhaustion.

She studied the rise and fall of his chest. A sprinkling of dark hair ran across it and lower. Two dark nipples showed, yet he looked different from her—strong and rugged, despite the puckered scar on his upper shoulder. The urgent desire to touch him made her hand tingle. While she hovered indecisively, battling against need, he stood. The covers dropped away. And Rosalind saw her husband in his full glory.

Her eyes bulged. Her pulse rate pumped in a rapid rhythm. Suddenly unsteady on her feet, she ran clammy hands down her nightgown to wipe them dry.

A soft sound jerked her gaze northward. The amusement in Hastings's eyes made her fidget and step from foot to foot. Part of her wanted to run and hide while the rest wanted to act with boldness and that made her blush again. Curiosity burned inside her as she picked up her candle and relit it with Hastings's. She had many unanswered questions. Was his skin the same texture as hers?

"Like what you see?" The instant the words left his mouth, Lucien wanted to curse. What the hell was he doing, taunting her like this? Taunting himself, his conscience prodded, because, like it or not, his body was reacting to her presence and basking in her innocence. Pretty soon she was going to notice, or at least wonder why his body parts were expanding.

Lucien grabbed a pair of breeches and stepped into them.

"I've nothing to compare you with, so I'm not sure."

"Nothing to…" The raspy crack of laughter astonished him as much as it did Rosalind, if her gaping mouth was anything to judge by. He fastened the breeches, keeping his gaze on her face. Curious. Inquisitive yet brave, given the way he was guilty of barking at her on occasion. Why didn't she give up on him? Swift on the heels of his thought came the realization he'd miss her attention.

She peered at him and he had to smother his amusement. Did she know he could see straight through the nightgown when she held her candle up like that? For a tiny thing, she was surprisingly well endowed. The stirring at his groin wrenched his thoughts to an abrupt halt.

"Who was in your room?" A change of subject would aid both of them. Hell of a lot safer.

"How should I know?" Her impatience was clear. "Come and look. Are there secret passages leading from my chamber? It's the only thing I can

think of that makes sense. How else could a person enter my room without making the door creak?”

Lucien stared, amusement bubbling to the surface yet again. That was the longest speech he’d heard from her since their visit to the cove. The mouse had the courage of a lion.

He bowed. “After you, my lady.”

She swept from the room and stalked ahead of him, her candle lighting the way. Lucien grinned. If she stuck her nose much higher, she’d trip over her feet.

The journey to Rosalind’s chamber took mere seconds. A crafty way of luring him into her bed? Lucien pondered the thought. His cock tightened. Then he visualized Francesca. “Damn,” he muttered, willing his body to obedience.

As much as he loved his first wife and mourned her passing, he’d come to admire Rosalind for her bravery and generosity in helping the village people without complaint. She was the perfect mistress for St. Clare, according to Aunt Augusta. But thinking about her in a sexual manner made him feel disloyal.

He stepped over the threshold and Rosalind lit another candle. He couldn’t help himself. She thrust the candle at him and directed his attention to the floor.

“See,” she said.

Lucien looked. A few grains of sand lay on the carpet. “The maid needs to do a better job cleaning your shoes.”

“What?”

Her shriek made him wince. And disappointment surged to the fore. It *was* a scheme to get him into her chamber. Lucien edged toward the door. If he stayed he might give in to temptation.

Rosalind glared at the splotches of sand on the carpet. “There were footprints.” Her frown appeared frustrated as she glowered at him. “They’re gone now, but they were there. The footprints were not my imagination.”

Lucien sensed she wasn’t going to let him return to bed until they settled the matter to her satisfaction. “Where did they lead?”

One cotton-clad shoulder lifted in a helpless shrug. “I’m not sure.”

“What do you want me to do?” A trace of impatience escaped. He was here, wasn’t he?

“No one is listening to me. Mary is missing. She wouldn’t just leave without telling me. We grew up together. She *hasn’t* run off with a lover. Since I arrived at Castle St. Clare, I’ve been shot at by hunters, pushed out of bed and been under scrutiny.”

“When were you pushed out of bed?” It was the first he’d heard of it.

“The morning after our marriage.”

“You thought I did it? No, don’t try to deny it. It’s clear from your face.”

“Well, who else would do it?”

The scar on his cheek pulled in reaction.

“Don’t look so affronted,” Rosalind snapped. “What else was I meant to think when you kept trying to get me to cry off?”

“That was—” Lucien stopped abruptly.

“Yes?” One blond brow arched.

“Different. I didn’t push you from your bed.” Lucien gave the walls of her chamber a fresh assessment. “So you think there’s a secret passage?”

“I’ve looked several times but can’t see anything unusual. There’s no other explanation. Do you remember playing in hidden passages when you were a child?”

Lucien’s head snapped up to stare at her. “I thought I made it clear my memory of the past is nil. How would I know if there are passages?” Frustration churned his gut, nagging like a painful boil. It was true that fragments teased him, but they usually disappeared like mist, leaving him angry and discouraged. He still didn’t believe he was the long-lost heir, Hastings. Nothing he’d seen or thought of so far proved or disproved the notion. No, he belonged in Italy on the Bacci estate. “There are no passages, no plot to murder you or your maid. If that’s all, I’m returning to my chamber.”

“Wait.” Rosalind lurched at him, grasping his arm so he came to a halt. An almost pained look etched into her face. “Don’t go.”

Startled, Lucien waited. Her hand tightened on his forearm, her warmth shooting up his arm and galloping to his groin. He smothered a gasp. The speed of his physical reaction astonished him. Francesca remained in his thoughts. Constantly. And he continued with his determined search for her killer. But he thought about Rosalind too. His scar pulled so he knew he was frowning.

She was the type of person who touched others often. It wasn't an overly familiar action, more an offer of comfort. The strange thing was the way her touch warmed him and calmed his ruffled thoughts.

"There's no one in the room apart from us," he said. "Why don't I summon a maid to keep you company? I must travel to Dover on business tomorrow. It's a long journey. I need to sleep even if you don't."

Rosalind fought the need to shake him. He was lying. His need for sleep was an excuse for him to leave. Even if she hadn't read his thoughts, she'd have guessed by the way he raked his hand through his hair. There! He'd done it again. Her husband was uncomfortable in her presence and it showed.

She grimaced at her bare feet. The warmth from his skin worked its way up her arm, followed by a tingling sensation. A picture started to form in her mind. Not that woman again! Fighting her was like battling a ghost. Impossible. And she'd had enough. But before she ripped her hand off his arm, the picture formed. A man?

"What is it? What's wrong?" Hastings's fingers smoothed her arm and he patted her awkwardly. Like one would pat a child on the head.

"Nothing is wrong," Rosalind said. "Don't you have an early start tomorrow morning?"

"Of course."

Hastings strode to the door but glanced back over his shoulder once, his brows drawn together in a baffled expression. Rosalind bit back a snort. And he thought *he* was confused. He should try living in her shoes for a few days, with other people's thoughts and memories swirling about his brain. Then he'd really know the meaning of confusion.

"Good night," she said.

The door clicked softly as he closed it, leaving her alone.

Hawk.

Intense curiosity burned inside, and she wished Mary were here so they could discuss the matter. To think she'd come so close to actually seeing the man when she'd overheard him in the garden. This wasn't the first time the name Hawk had come to her in a vision. Just this morning, when she was treating the stable boy's cough, she'd read the lad's mind and seen a faceless character. She frowned. The stable boy was terrified of the mystery man.

Rosalind paced the length of her chamber, concentrating on the two different visions. It was curious that neither was clear. She paused by the walnut dresser and nodded abruptly as she came to a decision.

The solution was obvious. She needed to investigate Hawk herself and discover the man’s identity.

Chapter Ten

Early in the morning two days later, and Rosalind was alone again. She sighed before turning her attention to the chafing dish of eggs on the side table.

“Gloomy pile of rocks.” The idea of staying inside the castle all day brought on the urge to scream, loud and long, until everyone knew of her displeasure. With Mary still missing, she decided to walk to the village and question the seamstress, whether Hastings approved or not.

The butler entered the room and hovered just inside the doorway. After a pause, he coughed.

“Did you want something, Tickell?”

“I do not wish to disturb you, my lady, but there is a boy from the village at the kitchen door. He refuses to leave until he sees you.” It was clear the boy’s impudence offended Tickell.

Rosalind pushed her plate away, unable to eat while her mind was full of worry about Mary. Perhaps the boy had news. “I will see him.”

“In here?” Tickell’s voice rose in horror.

Rosalind took that to mean the boy from the village was a dirty urchin with light fingers. Either that or the thought of Lady Augusta’s disapproval struck healthy fear in the butler. Good point. “I’ll come to the kitchen. Let me finish breaking my fast first.”

“You will come to the kitchens?” Tickell sounded even more critical of this decision.

“Give the boy something to eat while he’s waiting.” She picked up her bowl of chocolate, giving Tickell no further opportunity to object. She grinned inwardly as the pause between his speaking and moving to carry out her instructions lengthened. Finally, she heard a sniff then slow, plodding footsteps as he departed.

Ten minutes after Tickell’s footfalls faded, she pushed her bowl aside and, after two wrong turnings, reached the kitchen slightly out of breath.

The cook, a thin woman with bright red cheeks and wisps of brown hair escaping from beneath her cap, looked up from her pastry. “Oh, my lady! Are ye lost?”

“No, I’ve come to see the village boy. Tickell said he was waiting to speak with me.” Rosalind searched the smoky room, but the only child visible was the one stacking logs beside the hearth. He tossed a log on the blazing fire, the vigorous flames sending off sweltering waves of heat. An older boy was turning a spit bearing a large joint of beef. A chubby maid measured ingredients into a large bowl.

Tickell stalked from the butlers’ pantry to direct orders at another maid plucking a chicken. When silence fell in the kitchen, he turned. “Lady Hastings, there you are.” His vexation at her appearance was evident in his straight shoulders and compressed mouth.

Rosalind smothered a smile. “Where is the boy?”

“Outside.” A pained inflection filled his voice this time as he glanced at the door leading to the kitchen garden.

Rosalind betrayed none of her annoyance. “Has he eaten?”

Tickell allowed a slight sniff. “Yes, my lady.”

“Very well. I would like a pot of chocolate and two cups, please.” Rosalind noted three stools in the far corner near the door. “We will have our chocolate over there.” She swept past Tickell and across the uneven flagstone floor to summon the boy.

Outside, a grubby boy scrambled to his feet. His nut-brown eyes widened until they resembled the round buttons on her best cloak. As she studied him, he swallowed audibly, but stood his ground despite his unease.

She smiled. “Hello. I understand you wish to speak with me on a matter of grave importance.”

The child swallowed again.

“Come inside. I have sore need of a cup of chocolate. I expect you’d like one too.” Rosalind made her way back into the kitchen, past the disapproving Tickell and the gaping cook to the group of stools. The hesitant footsteps behind told her the child followed as instructed.

“Sit,” Rosalind said to the boy, promptly following her own instruction. “Ah, here is the chocolate now.” She smiled encouragement at the young maid. A footman arrived with a small wooden table and the maid set down the tray with the chocolate pot, cups and a plate of jam tarts.

“What’s your name?” Rosalind asked, once the maid left them alone. She poured the chocolate into the two cups and, after sharp words from Tickell, the routine in the kitchen gradually resumed. She added a spoonful of honey to sweeten the chocolate and handed the cup to the boy. She placed two tarts on a plate and passed it to the child as well.

“Billy.”

“Well, Billy, how can I help you?”

The boy’s hand trembled. To give him time to gather his courage, Rosalind picked up her cup and took a sip.

“’Tis my brother,” the boy mumbled. He chose a jam tart and took a cautious bite.

“Is something wrong with your brother? Is he sick?”

Billy nodded vigorously while stuffing the rest of the jam tart in his mouth. He swallowed loudly then coughed.

Rosalind hid her smile. “Take a drink before you tell me more.”

A slurp sounded as Billy did as she suggested. Then he placed his cup down and leaned toward her. “Bin shot,” the boy whispered.

Rosalind drew in a sharp breath.

“In the leg. He can’t work at his job in stables. Ma cries. I heard how you be a healer.” Billy looked at her with childish hope. “Will you come?”

Shot. Rosalind glanced over her shoulder to see if any of the servants were listening. Satisfied none were close enough to hear, she whispered, “Who shot your brother?”

“Excise men chasing the smugglers.”

“Smugglers!” Rosalind slapped a hand over her mouth. Another glance reassured her no one had overheard. “Your brother is involved with the smugglers?”

“Aye, my lady.”

Hawk. “I’ll come and see your brother. Finish your chocolate while I collect my bag of medicines.” Rosalind stood. “Wait for me here.” It would offer the perfect opportunity to ask questions about Mary’s disappearance and the mystery man, Hawk.

A loud grinding rumble sounded without warning. The ground shook beneath her feet. Billy gasped, his eyes huge in a terrified face. A scream from the cook echoed through the kitchen. The rumbling increased. Copper pots and stoneware thumped to the ground. Iron pans clattered across the

floor before rattling to a noisy halt on the flagstones. The stack of logs by the fire toppled over.

“Lord save us!” a maid screeched.

Rosalind heard another praying at the top of her voice. A footman tripped over a log and cursed.

Tickell shouted for quiet. His hand lashed out, striking the nearest maid across the face. Her piercing screech subsided into noisy weeping.

Rosalind grabbed Billy’s upper arm. “Run outside. Wait in the garden and don’t come back inside. Hurry!”

Billy stood, but hesitated. Impatient, Rosalind shoved him in the middle of the back. “Hurry, Billy.”

The floor shook again and the flagstones lifted like a pot of stew bubbling on the fire. The beef roasting on the spit toppled into the fire. The meat hissed. A shower of hot embers shot out onto the hearth.

Dust and smoke filled the air, partially obscuring vision, making her eyes water. Another piercing scream rent the air. Rosalind whirled to see a maid disappear from sight. Her scream echoed eerily for a long time after she vanished through a hole in the floor.

“Tickell!” Rosalind grabbed hold of a sturdy table and inched toward the butler. “What’s happening?”

The floor shifted, sending Tickell lurching. An iron hook tumbled from the table where a maid had left it, striking him on the head. Blood gushed from his temple. At Rosalind’s shout, he glanced up, his face full of dazed confusion.

“Tickell, go outside into the garden. Take Cook with you.” Rosalind grabbed a sobbing Cook and shoved her at Tickell. “Go.” Her words were a sharp order and the butler obeyed without hesitation.

The rumbling ceased. A nerve-wrenching groan from one of the remaining maids sounded to her right. Rosalind edged closer to the huge, gaping hole that had appeared in the kitchen floor. When the dust cleared, she saw the sparkling blue of the ocean.

Rosalind patted the maid on the shoulder, intending to comfort her. Instead, she relived the maid’s memories of her friends toppling into the hole. Horrified, she wrenched her hand away. Her breathing sounded harsh and loud to her ears, the fearful image replaying in her mind.

Fretful cries and hysterical sobs galvanized her to action. “Are you hurt?” she demanded of the nearest maid.

“No, my lady.”

“Go and find Lord St. Clare or Mr. Soulden. Tell them I need their help.”

The maid sniffed and wiped a dirty hand across her tear-stained cheek. “Yes, my lady.”

Rosalind rushed to the side of the scullery boy, who lay on the floor, his skinny legs protruding from under a butcher’s slab. She felt for his pulse and swallowed. The poor child was dead. She moved on to the next. This time she felt a tiny, unsteady pulse beat.

Lord St. Clare burst into the kitchen. “Rosalind, child. What has happened?”

Charles followed a few seconds later. “What’s wrong? I couldn’t make sense of the maid’s blathering. She said the bottom had fallen out of England.”

Rosalind attempted a smile, but the sally wasn’t enough to overshadow her shock. “Not England. Castle St. Clare. The floor has collapsed and a maid has fallen through. We need help. Some of the servants are badly injured. We must move them in case more of the floor disintegrates.”

“Rosalind, child, let Charles and I deal with this. You go outside with the rest of the servants.”

“No. I can help. I’m skilled in healing. You need me here.”

“She’s right.” Charles assisted a pale, shocked servant to her side. The girl’s arm hung at an unnatural angle. “This girl is hurt. Where’s Tickell?”

“He’s injured. I sent him outside with Cook.”

The earl’s face paled in shock. “Good God, Charles. Look.”

Charles edged toward the gaping hole. Rosalind inched forward too, even though gazing down the crevice made her dizzy. The chocolate inside her stomach swirled in agitation, but awed horror propelled her to look. Far below, wicked rocks glistened with the sea spray. A briny tang filled her nostrils. The lifeless body of a maid floated in the water, hitting against the razor-sharp rocks with each fresh surge of the tide. Another body—the footman’s—draped over an out-hanging rock.

Rosalind squeezed her eyes shut. The sick sensation in her belly intensified. She didn’t want to look, but she had to. It could have easily been her down there.

Charles glanced over his shoulder. “Rosalind, we’re going to need help. Summon the stable lads and send a servant to bring Mansfield. He knows

the coastline well. It may be easier to climb up rather than risk dropping ropes down."

***

The meal that night was a simple one. Rosalind gazed down at her plate and wondered how the others were able to eat. The thought of it made her ill—all those poor servants.

"Summon Tickell," Lady Augusta said, after slurping the last spoonful of game soup from her bowl.

"Tickell is ill," Rosalind said. "I sent him to his quarters to rest."

"But I want more soup."

St. Clare sighed, looking old and tired. "Augusta, let the servants be. They have lost friends today."

Rosalind laid down her spoon and stood. She stepped past Charles, their guest Mansfield, and St. Clare at the head of the table.

"Where are you going?" Lady Augusta demanded. "We haven't finished our meal."

"You wanted more soup." Rosalind reached for the tureen sitting near Lady Augusta's right hand. "One spoon or two?"

Charles chuckled. Mansfield grinned, but Lady Augusta let out a screech of horror. "Put that down," she snapped.

Rosalind filled Lady Augusta's soup bowl despite the woman's consternation. "Anyone else?"

"I'll have some, child," St. Clare said. "Augusta, stop your snarling. The child is right. The servants who are unharmed have enough to do at present."

The soup served, Rosalind slipped back into her chair. One thing preyed on her mind. Mary had burbled endlessly of the treasure but hadn't mentioned any tunnels running beneath Castle St. Clare. "Did you know of the tunnels beneath the kitchen? Have they always been there?" Her voice wobbled a fraction as she thought of her missing maid. If only she'd return. Even her chiding would be welcome at this point.

St. Clare stared at his soup. "There have always been rumors handed down through the family of tunnels and lost treasure. I searched as a young lad, as did these two scamps along with Hastings when they were younger.

None of us found a hint of a secret passage. I thought the stories of the lost St. Clare treasure were just that—rumors."

"You didn't find any concealed passages when you were looking?" Rosalind scrutinized their faces closely.

Charles shrugged. "Not a thing."

"We did find the priest's hole," Mansfield said.

"That's right," Charles said. "I'd forgotten about that."

Lady Augusta chuckled. "I remember how disappointed you were when you found it led nowhere."

Doubt and a hint of suspicion rose in Rosalind. How could none of the family be aware of the labyrinth beneath the castle? She peered at each of the men. Was one of them responsible for the cave-in? "Someone knows about the passages. The digging is fresh. Our servants died because someone ordered the tunnels extended."

"Rubbish," Lady Augusta said.

"I think," Rosalind continued undaunted, "that someone believes the rumors, and they're searching for the St. Clare treasure. What are we going to do about it?"

***

Three days later, all those injured in the kitchen tragedy were resting peacefully and no longer required her presence. Rosalind hurried into the outer garden, her bag of medicines tucked over her arm. She'd discovered a shortcut to the village earlier in the week and intended to visit Billy and his family and search for Mary. After a swift glance over her shoulder, she quickened her pace, almost running in her haste to escape.

At least Hastings wasn't here, demanding she take an escort.

"Going somewhere, Lady Hastings?"

Rosalind bit back a squeal of fright, but a tiny squeak emerged anyway. Heat filled her cheeks as she pulled her nose away from Mansfield's snowy white shirt. "Sorry, I didn't hear you." She took a rapid step back and saw Charles was with him.

"Deep in thought, were you?" Mansfield tapped his pipe on a tree trunk to knock the ash from the bowl before tucking it away in a pocket. "Perhaps thinking of your husband and his return?"

"Of course not," she said so quickly that Mansfield grinned.

Charles inspected his cuff and brushed a speck of dust from the blond lace. “You shouldn’t try to fib to Mansfield. He has oodles of younger sisters, you know.” He looked up from his handiwork, amusement in his twinkling eyes.

“I am going to the village to search for Mary.” Her shoulders stiffened as she waited for one of the men to reproach her for wasting her time. No matter what they said, she intended to hunt for her maid.

“You should take a footman with you,” Charles said.

“The footmen are busy with kitchen repairs. I didn’t think it was right to take them from their duties. They have enough to do without me adding to their workload.”

“Rosalind’s right,” Mansfield said. “She won’t come to any harm down in the village. My sisters go all the time.”

Charles frowned but added no further protests. Rosalind decided to flee before he demanded she remain at the castle. “I’m going straight there and back.” She waved and set off without looking back.

Ten minutes later, she spied Billy and some other children collecting wood on the outskirts of the village.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t able to come earlier.”

The boy shrugged. “You couldn’t, lady. The servants needed you.”

“How is your brother?”

“Sick. He’s worse.”

He led her along the busy village street, skirting two wagons and, to Rosalind’s silent approval, a row of tethered horses. The scent of freshly baked bread filled the air long before they reached the baker’s shop. Billy looked longingly at the loaves of bread cooling in the window, but instead of stopping, he turned down a concealed lane behind the baker’s shop. They walked for a further five minutes, dodging muddy holes and puddles of water, passing a pile of rubbish that made Rosalind want to stop breathing. The stench clogged her nostrils and made her stomach roil. The cottages became increasingly dilapidated, and Rosalind began to understand why Billy appeared so grubby.

“This is where I live.” He came to a halt beside the last leaning cottage in the row. He opened the door, and Rosalind followed him inside.

The reek of rotting flesh was the first thing to hit her after her eyes adjusted to the dim light. A groan and the rustle of bedding had her stumbling toward the occupant of the pallet bed.

Her patient didn't seem much older than Billy. A well-mended sheet tangled in his legs as he tossed and turned, trying to find a comfortable position.

"Hello." She set her medicine bag on the floor, stripped off her gloves and laid her hand across her patient's forehead. The boy's flesh scorched her hand. He moaned softly, scarcely aware of her presence. She tugged the sheet away from his legs. "Billy, how long has your brother been like this?"

"Since Tuesday."

Almost four days. His leg was red and swollen in the dim light. Probably shiny too, but it was difficult to see with the wound covered.

"Can you make Harry well?" Billy asked.

Rosalind heard hope in the boy's voice. She wanted to lie, to say all would be well. "I'm not sure, Billy. I'll do the best I can for him. First, we need to boil water to cleanse the wound." A quick glance confirmed there was no fresh water available. "Could you fetch a bucket of water for me?"

"Aye." Billy collected the bucket and left without another word.

She unwound the blood-streaked bandage. Harry winced, letting out a pained whimper.

"There now, I'll try not to hurt you."

The lad's eyes popped open. "Mother?"

"Shh. Lie still." Rosalind peeled the bandage from the wound. The stench stole her breath, and she knew the likelihood of the boy's recovery was remote. Not that she'd stop trying to cure him.

In her mind, she went through the steps her grandmother had shown her many years ago. She glanced at his face. His eyes had closed again and he'd drifted into unconsciousness. Probably the best thing. Billy had said they'd removed the bullet, but it was possible a foreign substance remained embedded in the wound.

As she opened her bag and pulled out a sharp dagger, she wondered how the boy had become injured. She glanced over her shoulder, listening for Billy's return, but heard nothing except Harry's ragged breathing and the creaking of the cottage. She placed her hands on his forehead. At first, there was nothing, then a full-blown scene exploded inside her head.

Rosalind gasped and jerked her hand away. But the colors, the smells, and the bloody gore of the scene filled her mind. *Bright red blood, screaming men, panicked horses. The pungent scent of gunpowder hung on the air along with smoke from a fire. Sweat. More blood.* Harry's horror

screamed through her mind, the white-hot pain in his leg bringing tears to her eyes.

A clatter, followed by footsteps, jerked Rosalind back to the present. Her breasts heaved while she rode out the pain shooting through her tense body. Calm, she reminded herself. Calm.

Billy placed a bucket of steaming water by the pallet. “The baker gave me some hot water, just off the fire, my lady.”

“Thank you.” Rosalind pulled a length of clean cloth from her bag and dipped it in the water. She worked deftly by instinct, cleansing the boy’s wound, intent on the image returning to her mind.

“Move! The excise men be coming!”

Rosalind experienced Harry’s panic, and she shuddered, drawn into his terror. *The soldiers mustn’t catch him. The tales of torture in the prisons made him run blindly after the other men. He staggered under the load of bulky silk he carried.* Mustn’t leave it. Mam needs money. Must get to safety. Hawk will dock my share. Heavy. Arms hurt. Keep going. The cave. There be the cave. Safe. Bit farther. Keep going, Harry.

“Stop right there, you thieving bastards! In the name of the king! Stop!”

Harry ignored the bellowed order and kept running. A gunshot rang out. Frank faltered beside him. The cask of brandy Frank carried smashed on the rocky ground. Harry turned, but blank eyes stared back. Frank was dead.

“Run, lad. Frank’s done for. Save yer own skin.”

More gunshots. It was dark, so dark Harry couldn’t see the path, but he kept running, his lungs wheezing like the blacksmith’s bellows. Another shot. Pungent gunpowder. Wind whistled past his ear. Something hit a rock right by his leg. Then his leg collapsed under him. He staggered, the bundle of silk toppled, but he grabbed it before it rolled away.

“Don’t stop, lad. You’re almost safe.”

Pain. God, his leg hurt so bad.

“Lad, let me help you.” The man appeared in the mouth of the cave. A black cloak billowed in the breeze.

“I got my load,” Harry muttered. “Hawk will pay me.”

“Yes, lad. You’ll get your portion.” The man helped Harry stagger to his feet.

“Hawk,” he gasped, seeing the black mask that went with the cloak.

“Let’s get you to safety and we’ll see about digging that bullet out. We need you better so you can watch Hastings and the castle. You! Fire at the excise men if they come too close to the cave. Give the rest a chance to get to safety through the labyrinth. Half an hour should do it.”

“You’ll pay?” Harry demanded.

Hawk chuckled and ruffled his hair. “Yes, lad. You do a good job. You’ll get the money you deserve.”

“Will Harry get better? My lady?” A sharp tug on her scarlet mantle pulled her from the horror. She swallowed, the taste of blood in her mouth and the stench of gunpowder still strong.

“Will Harry get well?”

“I’ll do my best for him,” she said, skirting the question. Hawk was paying Harry to spy on Hastings. And probably others too.

Rosalind finished winding the bandage around the cleansed wound and tied a knot so the soft linen cloth she’d brought with her would stay fastened.

“Billy, were other men wounded at the same time as Harry?”

“Aye. Yer to stop by the smithy afore you leave for the castle,” Billy said. “The blacksmith’s son carries a bullet in his gut.”

Rosalind nodded. “I’ll stop there on my way home.” Perhaps she would learn more of the man Hawk during her search for Mary.

Everything she’d learned so far indicated his wish to harm Hastings. A selfish thought surfaced, making her brow knit in worry.

There would be no babies if Hastings died.

His strong and rigid profile and dark, windblown hair filled her mind. Tall, healthy and vigorous now, but if Hawk had his way he’d be dead. The fearful images built in her mind. A tremor shook her hands as she refastened her medicine bag. No! She wouldn’t let Hawk murder her husband.

Her dream of a secure future depended on it.

Chapter Eleven

Rosalind crept toward the stables, searching for a glimpse of Hastings's black. She didn't know which stall belonged to Oberon, but the sudden crack of a hoof striking a stable wall, followed swiftly by a stable boy's shout, reassured her Hastings had arrived home. She'd worried about his safety during his absence and a tiny part of her—a niggling voice at the back of her mind—had pestered her with the notion he mightn't return at all. Thankfully, she could now cast that particular concern aside and concentrate on the happenings at Castle St. Clare and her search for Mary. Since treating Harry two days ago, she'd heard nothing but speculation about lost treasure.

Her lips made a moue of irritation. Every time she'd questioned a man or woman, she'd heard the same thing. "No. Haven't seen your maid. They find treasure in Castle St. Clare, then?" Despite persistent queries, no one knew anything about Mary's disappearance and that worried her. She hadn't picked up thoughts of Mary when she'd touched people either. An ache started behind her eyes, and she forced herself to concentrate on other things. Tears wouldn't help her find Mary.

Eavesdropping via her sight had confirmed Hawk's ruthless determination and the villagers' contradictory feelings for the smuggler. They feared him yet relied on his generosity to survive. Like a double-edged sword, this bestowed great power on the man.

"The next shipment from France will land tomorrow night. You're to pass the word to the others."

Rosalind froze. Thank goodness none of the stable lads were present to witness her behavior. The voices were coming from behind her in the tack room, which meant she'd need to hide in the stable—possibly in one of the stalls.

"Does Hawk need all of us?"

"Aye, 'tis a full load. Two boats. Wait. Roberts? You finished in there, boy? They need help in the castle."

A stable boy exited the end stall closest to the tack room. Rosalind flattened herself against the wall, praying he didn't look in her direction.

"Go on with you, boy."

The stable boy thumped past, allowing Rosalind to relax until the voices moved closer.

Bother. Rosalind glanced at the stable stalls again and swallowed. She'd have to hide in there whether she liked it or not. She edged up to the closest. The horse inside moved restlessly, the straw rustling.

"Come into the stables. Less chance anyone overhearing in there. All the lads are helping in the kitchen."

With trepidation spiking her pulse, Rosalind tugged open the stall and slid inside, pulling the door to behind her. The distinctive smell of animal made her nose quiver. A horse's snort brought a soft gasp. Her eyes widened while her heart thudded anxiously.

Oberon.

Of all the stalls to choose, she'd picked the one belonging to Hastings's black devil horse.

"Whoa, boy," she whispered, her knees trembling as she squashed against the wooden wall of the stall. To her relief, the horse went back to his bucket of oats.

"And 'bout the other matter?"

"Hastings?"

Rosalind froze like a pond in winter. Hastings?

"I hear he's returned."

"Aye. Hawk had me set someone to follow him, but they lost him on the way to Dover. I've no idea where he went or what he did while he was gone. Hawk is going to have my hide for this."

"'Ere now. Right interesting that. What if 'e were the one organizing the tunneling under the kitchens. Did Hawk think of that?"

Questions sprang to her lips, questions she wanted to demand of the two men. Was Hastings responsible for the tunnels? Was it possible?

"Hastings is the treasure hunter, you mean?"

"Could well be. Why don't you mention the possibility to Hawk? Might ease his anger."

To Rosalind's frustration, it sounded as though the two men had stopped right outside Oberon's stall. It was impossible for her to open the door, even a fraction. If the men were linked to Hawk, they were dangerous.

“Watch out. Someone’s coming. Damn, it’s Hastings come to see to his ’orse. Big black brute. You’d better leave before ’e sees you and starts asking questions.”

Hastings! Rosalind swallowed a groan. He’d be heading straight to Oberon’s stall, and the first thing he’d find would be her cowering inside. Then he’d want explanations. Before she was anywhere near prepared, footsteps sounded outside the stall. Oberon fidgeted, tossing his head, snorting. Rosalind tried to melt into the wall, her heart drumming while she eyed the beast.

“Good afternoon, my lord.”

When Hastings stepped into the stall and saw her, the other man would know she’d eavesdropped on his conversation.

“Will you be taking your ’orse out? Do you want me to summon a stable lad to saddle up for you?”

“No, I’ll do it,” Hastings said. “The lads are all helping up in the castle.”

“I can do it for you, if you want. I was going to ’ead up to the castle as well.” Rosalind sensed the man’s hesitation.

“You go ahead.”

“Right you are, my lord.”

Rosalind screwed up her face in a frown as she heard Hastings whistle to Oberon through the door. The black whickered softly in return. What was she going to say? What was she going to do? She imagined Hastings standing on the other side of the door. Excitement shot through her veins, despite her predicament.

The hinge creaked when the door opened. Rosalind watched with a combination of trepidation and anticipation. The gap widened to reveal Hastings’s shiny black boots, his mud-splattered stockings and breeches. Her eyes rose to his gray shirt and black jacket. Her mouth dried, her pulse pounding with expectancy, excitement. She swallowed and lifted her gaze to loose black hair and his…mouth. Finally, she met his astonished eyes.

Speak, she thought frantically. Quick before he asks what you are doing here. Distract. Attack. Something. Anything.

“You’re back,” she cried and planted a kiss on his beguiling lips.

He tensed. In shock or astonishment, Rosalind wasn’t sure but ceased to care. His lips were as soft as a baby’s skin. Her hands curled into his

shoulders and she leaned into him, enjoying the play of hard muscles and the earthy masculine scent of him.

"What are you doing?" he demanded finally, pulling away enough to glare at her.

"I'm pleased to see you." A stupid half-wit would sense his bewilderment. But along with confusion lay shocked enjoyment. And that, decided Rosalind, was a good thing.

"I've only been gone for a week," Hastings said.

Rosalind half expected him to thrust her away and demand to know what she was doing with his horse. But he didn't. A perplexed furrow appeared between his eyes. She fought to maintain an agreeable expression as her gaze drifted back to his lips. This kissing business was a little disappointing. Somehow, she'd expected something more.

"Did I do something wrong when I kissed you?" Rosalind screwed up her nose, searching his face for enlightenment.

If anything, he seemed more confounded.

"Do I need more practice? Perhaps if I try again I can do better." She leaned toward her husband with her lips pursed. A child that looked like Hastings would please her very much.

Hastings's hands shot out to grab her forearms. "What are you doing? This talk of kissing—it's not proper."

"You sound like my aunt." Rosalind tossed her head. "If I'm not allowed to kiss you, then how do I learn? Should I ask Charles, or perhaps Mansfield, to teach me?" Lucien stared at his wife in disbelief. She wanted to practice kissing. His chest felt tight inside as though someone had bound him with stout ropes. The idea of her kissing another man made a muscle near his scar twitch. "Keep away from Charles and Mansfield. You're married to me."

"But you don't kiss me. You're not a husband." Her blue eyes narrowed and, in that instant, she reminded him of Francesca again. Stubborn and determined. Focused.

Lucien hauled the English mouse close and planted his lips on hers, reacting to the provocation before he'd thought the matter through.

She stood on tiptoes, straining to meet him halfway. Soft lips, untutored lips, trembled beneath the onslaught. It was her innocence that made him gentle the kiss, to sip and savor where seconds before he'd demanded. Lavender and the scent of another flower flowed over him. Her hands

burrowed inside his jacket and around his waist, and she relaxed, sinking against him until he felt her breasts, her body imprinting against him. Danger, his mind shouted, but his body had other ideas.

Lucien groaned at her innocent contact with his lower body. Without volition, his tongue traced along the soft fullness of her bottom lip. She gasped, and his tongue slipped inside to taste oranges and cloves. Her hands glided up his chest, past his thundering heart to twine around his neck. The touch of warm feminine hands reminded him he'd intended to kiss her once. Chastely. Drawing deep for strength, he pulled away, breathing hard.

Damn the mouse and the way she wriggled beneath his skin and made him feel. He'd spent the time away from her thinking, wondering. And worrying. She still insisted someone was stalking her and intended her harm. With all that had happened, he was starting to believe her. The whispers during his visit to Dover confirmed the danger shadowing those who lived in Castle St. Clare. He'd stopped at the Fox and Hounds down on the waterfront for refreshment, and the innkeeper had told him of money offered to three of his regulars to scare the lady of St. Clare. Lucien had taken that to mean Rosalind. After further questioning, he'd learned the men had failed to reappear. Lucien wondered if they were the hunters who'd shot at Rosalind and her maid. They could still be in the area, which meant Rosalind must stay at the castle for her safety.

He studied the petite blonde he'd married. She wasn't the spoiled aloof woman he'd assumed on their first meeting.

She whimpered, pressing against him urgently. His head dipped to brush her lips with his while his mind sorted through the possibilities.

"Easy," he whispered, breaking off their kiss and smoothing one hand over her tangled curls. "There, I've kissed you. Tell me why you're in Oberon's stall."

"I…I was looking for my kitten."

The high color on her cheeks told him she lied. "Come, Rosalind. You can do better than that. The truth now."

"I was eavesdropping," she acknowledged without a trace of guilt.

Lucien didn't like her confession. Hawk had ears everywhere, many of them willing to slit a throat for a few measly gold coins. The men he'd learned about in Dover could be Hawk's allies. He wished she'd listen to reason. He'd hate to have another woman's death on his conscience. "Why?"

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. I was looking for you. I wanted to know if you’d returned home.”

“Why?”

She smiled. “It’s lonely without you.”

Every instinct inside Lucien leaped to attention. He scrutinized her face, sensing an untruth again. He hadn’t spent much time with her. In fact, he kept trying to push her away. What was she hiding? “Lady Augusta seeks your company.”

“Humph. She wants a handy body to sharpen her tongue on.”

The image unfurled a grin and the attached emotion irritated him. He meant to keep this woman at a distance, but somehow she managed to creep past every one of his defenses.

“You’ve heard about the kitchen caving in?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Yes.”

“One tunnel beneath the castle probably means there are others. Maybe Mary is trapped in one, which is why she hasn’t returned.”

Lucien grabbed her shoulders and shook her lightly. “Tell me you’re not searching for more.”

“I have to find Mary. She wouldn’t just run off. Besides, someone is using a passage to gain access to my chamber.” Her chin jutted up in a gesture Lucien was all too familiar with. “Do you think the locals are right and treasure is buried beneath the North Tower? Or perhaps the part that’s covered with ivy contains hidden riches.”

There was no point forbidding her to search. If he’d learned anything during their short marriage, it was of her unwavering determination, but he had a duty to keep her protected.

“You stay away from the North Tower. It’s dangerous.” Lucien took her arm and hustled her from the stall. “Tell me what you’ve been doing while I’ve been in Dover.” Immediate tension froze her face. He caught a fleeting expression of guilt. “Have you visited the village?” he asked in a low growl.

Rosalind avoided his gaze and studied her feet. “I was searching for Mary.”

She hadn’t taken an escort. Her guilty face told him the truth.

“I can make sure you don’t leave the castle again.”

Her head shot up. Blue eyes flashed with a hint of temper and it intrigued him. “You wouldn’t.”

“Try me.”

“But the village people rely on me to treat the sick.”

“They won’t have anyone to rely on if you’re dead.”

“The castle isn’t safe either,” she pointed out. “Mary’s still missing. Servants have died.”

The blonde chit was blaming him! “I know people have died. Do you think I’m happy about it?”

“No, I’m saying you should take action so there’s no repeat.”

Her gaze challenged him, and Lucien’s temper soared. What the devil did she think he was doing? Going to a social gathering with the neighbors? “I’ll take care of everything.”

“You must put an end to the rumors of treasure.”

“Madam, cease your prattling on matters you have no knowledge of. We will return to the castle.” He offered his arm and glared when she was slow to obey. Finally, she laid her hand on his arm, her distaste of touching him clear. Strange, she hadn’t minded kissing him. She had initiated the kiss and now she was treating him like a clump of nettles. “Come. Lady Augusta requires your attendance.”

His temper pricked, Lucien strode from the stable yard and under the castle portcullis. He clasped her hand in a firm grasp, giving Rosalind little option but to walk with him.

“You don’t take a guard with you when you leave the castle.”

Speechless for a moment, Lucien wondered how to get through to her. Although the woman was a nuisance, he had to admit he liked her determination. “I’m a man,” he said finally. “It’s different.”

“Humph!” Her mouth flattened and her face turned an alarming shade of red.

That line of argument had never worked with Francesca either. “You have something to say?”

“Nothing,” she snapped. “Nothing you’d want to hear, stubborn lout,” she added in a low mutter he wasn’t supposed to hear.

He suppressed amusement at the insult. Danger. Now there was the rub. Rosalind knew nothing but the tip of the rotten stench enclosing both St. Clare castle and village. And he wasn’t about to share the horrors with her. Bad enough for him to suffer the consequences. “Tell me of the progress in the kitchens. I understand you ordered work to begin on new kitchens.”

“The old kitchen was disgraceful,” Rosalind said. “It’s no wonder the food served is inedible.”

Lucien noticed the firming of her chin, the narrowing of her eyes and the unswerving resolve. The devil made him prod. “Lady Augusta tells me your plans are a shocking waste of money. Money the St. Clare family can ill afford.”

“Perhaps I know where the treasure is.”

A fleeting memory flashed through his mind. Lucien came to an abrupt halt, trying not to concentrate too hard or force the memory. Children. A cave…then nothing. His curse rang through the air, heartfelt and colorful.

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Absolutely nothing.”

Her hand tightened on his arm. “You’ve recalled a memory from your past.”

“Maybe.” His voice was curt and he knew it. Frustration and self-preservation made him refuse to discuss the past and his lost memories. People treated him differently when they realized, looking for signs of madness with each furtive glance.

“Is it the treasure?”

Lucien’s head whipped about to stare at her in consternation. Everyone except the English mouse.

“I thought so.” Every word dripped with smug satisfaction. “Did you search for the treasure when you were a child?”

“Usually after listening to the tales spun by Charles’s father before he died. He was a gifted storyteller. He made it all sound so exciting. He…” Lucien trailed off with astonishment. The memories had arrived without prompting. He’d just known instead of having to forcibly drag them from the fog inside his head. He concentrated, a furrow forming between his brows as he pushed for more. Was it possible the earl spoke the truth, and he was a St. Clare after all?

Rosalind tightened her grip on his forearm. “Don’t. Don’t force the memories that haunt you. You’ll make your head hurt. Tell me more about the tales your uncle told.”

“I don’t remember.” Disappointment beat at him. Damn it! Why couldn’t he remember the important things? Childhood memories were a waste of time.

They entered the Great Hall. Muffled thumping echoed through the castle, a reminder of the needless deaths of the servants.

“Have you tried to discover where the passage goes?”

Lucien turned to study his wife. Her face held innocent enquiry, yet she’d voiced the very thing he’d mused over. “You’re not going to search for treasure,” he said. Firmly, he thought.

“I’ve already started. I’ve been keeping my eyes and ears open while I look for Mary.”

Lucien sucked in a deep breath, biting his tongue when he really wanted to shake sense into the woman. No matter how many times he issued orders, she went her own pigheaded way. “Do you want me to lock you in your room?”

“At the risk of repeating myself, I have been shot at and thumped over the head. And it was only luck that saved me from falling through the kitchen floor.”

“Make no mistake, I will lock you in your room if you insist on placing yourself in dangerous situations.”

“But that’s not fair.”

“Rosalind, I don’t have time to guard you, and since you refuse to obey my instructions to take a footman with you, you leave me with no alternative.”

The wounded look on her face made him feel like a bully. However, he had enough to deal with. His investigations in Dover had borne fruit. After questioning several of the captains, he’d learned of a boat that had sailed to France around the time of the attack on him and Francesca. Not noteworthy until the captain mentioned several of the local thugs for hire were on board, and they’d boasted of easy riches for disposing of an Italian and his wife. He hadn’t been able to track down the boat and captain, since they hadn’t been in port, but he had located one of the seamen who’d sailed with the *Gallant* on a previous voyage. Bitter at his unfair dismissal, the man had grasped the opportunity to earn a few coins and gain revenge. He’d heard the men talk about a man called Hawk and how he was paying them handsomely.

Yes, it was only a matter of time and he’d have Hawk. Along with explanations that were unclear to him right now—provided he could make the man talk.

“Will you stay locked in your chamber?”

Lucien gaped at his wife. “What?”

“I asked if you would stay in your chamber.”

“I heard your words. It was the meaning I didn’t fathom.”

“You’re in danger too. I heard the villagers talking.”

“There’s no point arguing. Come, Lady Augusta waits for you in the Chinese Drawing Room.” He didn’t have time for this.

Rosalind wanted to screech in a tantrum of Miranda proportions. He refused to acknowledge the danger to himself while he ordered her about like a servant. Who’d watch his back? There’d be no dark-haired sons or daughters for her if her husband died.

A resolute determination crept to the surface, undaunted by Hastings’s threats. There was too much of her future at stake here. If he refused to take safety concerns into account, then she’d act as guard and escort.

Hastings ushered her to the Chinese Drawing Room and paused before entering. Rosalind grimaced at the closed door separating them from Lady Augusta’s wrath. “Can’t you pretend you couldn’t find me?”

Hastings’s chuckle held clear satisfaction. It was obvious he intended to keep her busy waiting on Lady Augusta so she wouldn’t have time to disobey his edicts. He pushed the door open and stood aside for her to enter. Lady Augusta sat in an upright chair, her head lowered in sleep.

“Where are you going now?” The man was in danger, whether he believed it or not.

“I need to check on the roofing and rebuilding in the village.”

“I don’t think we should wake Lady Augusta,” Rosalind said. “She needs her rest.”

At that moment, Lady Augusta stirred. Her head whipped up, her eyes instantly alert. “What took you so long? I summoned you an hour ago.”

Hastings edged toward the door and disappeared.

“I have just returned from the village,” Rosalind said. “I came as soon as I realized you needed me.”

“Humph! I need more of the tonic you made me.”

“I thought you said it didn’t help.”

Lady Augusta’s glare was sharp enough to pierce the thick castle walls, but it didn’t put a dent in Rosalind’s rising spirits. Lady Augusta had gifted her with a reason to wander outside.

Rosalind worked at keeping her satisfaction hidden but it burst forth in a smile. “I’ll need to collect more fresh herbs before I can make more of your

tonic. I'll see to it immediately." She bustled from the Chinese Drawing Room. In the Long Gallery, the same edgy sensation she experienced while she was alone in her chamber shivered down her backbone. She forced away her unease and pretended she noticed nothing out of the ordinary.

As she entered the Great Hall, she slowed. Janet and the dark-haired maid strolled through the hall and, seconds later, Tickell followed, nodding at her.

"Do you require anything?" he asked.

"No, thank you. I'm running an errand for Lady Augusta." Rosalind collected a basket and slipped outside. In a hurry to gather her herbs so she could snoop a little, she scurried along the courtyard wall, heading for the small gate that led into the North Tower garden. All the herbs she required grew in this vicinity. A visit from Lady Pascoe had cut short the search she'd conducted during her last foray for fresh herbs. This was a good opportunity to see if she could discover anything to help her find Mary. The pungent scent of basil filled the air as she plucked several stems. Soon sage, comfrey and lavender joined the basil in her basket. They would make a rub, which would hopefully reduce the swelling of Lady Augusta's joints. A lemon from one of the potted trees recently relocated from the orangery. Some celery to make a tincture. Perhaps some chamomile if she could find some to add to her tonic.

Her hand froze as she picked a second lemon. Mary should be here with her, scolding her about dallying in the fresh air and arguing about which one of them would carry the herb basket. Her absence was a huge gnawing hole. She clamped her eyes shut, battling the pain piercing her heart. No one understood her concern, but Mary was more than a maid. She was her friend and the only person who'd stood up for her in her uncle's house. The people of Stow-on-the-Wold had whispered about witchcraft, especially after the incident with their neighbor's son, Thomas.

A watery chuckle emerged as she recalled Mary taking to him with the straw broom. He'd intended stealing more than a kiss when he'd cornered her in the barn. Of course, she hadn't helped matters when she'd informed him the boil on his backside would become painful and not to look to her for treatment. He'd had his hand on her breast, squeezing it painfully, when Mary appeared, wielding the broom like a sword.

No, Mary would never leave without telling her. She was brave and loyal. Sniffing, Rosalind pushed the memories to the back of her mind.

Mary was her best friend, and she owed it to her to continue looking. There had to be a logical explanation for her disappearance.

Rosalind pulled a final fragrant lavender stalk and turned in the direction of the North Tower, her skirts sweeping past the tangle of plants and blackberries. It wouldn't hurt to investigate a little under the pretext of searching for more herbs.

At the edge of the garden wilderness, her steps slowed. She squinted into the afternoon sun. The North Tower clung to the edge of the cliff. Part of the weathered gray tower had crumbled into the sea, leaving a skeleton behind. A pile of debris blocked the arched doorway. As Rosalind pondered the tower, a raven flew through a slit in the wall, its loud caw echoing eerily before it reached the open sky. A shudder worked through her body, and she glanced over her shoulder in disquiet.

Then she heard the clip-clop of hooves on the stony track on the other side of the tower. A flicker of apprehension gave her feet wings. She ran for an oak tree at the edge of the garden, left her basket of herbs hidden in the undergrowth, and scrambled up into the lower branches.

The horse trotted closer. A combination of misgiving and daring swept through her veins when she peered through the screen of green leaves.

It was Hastings.

Chapter Twelve

Oops. Hastings had seen her. The clenched jaw and narrowed eyes were discouraging, but she owed it to Mary to keep searching. Her friend would do nothing less for her. And as for her husband—he was in danger whether he denied it or not. Someone had to help keep him safe. Her chin lifted in determination as she met his scowling gaze.

Rosalind clambered down from the low oak branch and put her gown and cloak to rights. “Ah, good afternoon.”

“What the devil do you think you’re doing?”

“I’ve been collecting herbs. See?” She lifted her basket and waved it in front of her with a flourish.

“And?”

“I’m searching for Mary.” Bother, he’d seen through her subterfuge. Perhaps partial honesty would work. “And you’re in danger too. I’ve tried to tell you, yet you refuse to listen.”

A bark of laughter escaped him, transforming his face into someone more approachable, a man she definitely wanted to know. “What sort of danger?”

“A man is trying to kill you.” Rosalind pursed her lips, undecided about how much to tell him. She’d worked so hard to earn his approval, his trust, his smiles. Telling him of her cursed gift would change everything.

“How do you know?” Curiosity glinted in his dark eyes.

Panic roared through her, lodging like a huge knot inside her stomach. She wrenched her gaze away. She couldn’t tell him only to watch the fear and superstition slide across his face like a mask. A few words would seal her fate. The secure, loving relationship she craved would slip beyond her grasp.

“I just know,” she said. His stern features propelled her to blurt out more. “I heard men talking in the stables. Someone is paying the servants to watch you.”

Hastings snorted. “I suggest you return to the castle. We’ll discuss your punishment when I return.”

He discounted everything she told him. “But what about Mary?” she asked.

“I will search for your maid.”

“But…” His irritated expression halted her objection. St. Bridget’s nose! She couldn’t let him go without trying to warn him. “Be careful. You can’t trust—”

“Where is your escort?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Return to the castle now. I’ll deal with you when I return. Go now.” He waited until she reached the garden before he wheeled Oberon about and galloped away.

Rosalind winced. He didn’t believe her. What was she going to do? She couldn’t tell him how she knew so much. Her gift. Her visions. He’d start treating her like a circus freak, if he didn’t call her witch first or commit her to Bedlam, just as her aunt had constantly threatened.

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Rosalind’s uneasiness increased when Hastings failed to appear for the evening meal.

“Where is Hastings?” Lady Augusta demanded of Charles.

“I have no idea.” He turned to Mansfield, who had joined the family for dinner. “Did you see him on the way here?”

Mansfield shrugged and toyed with his glass of wine. “I haven’t seen him. I’ve been otherwise engaged.”

“Dallying with the widow on the road to Dover, no doubt,” Lady Augusta snapped. “He’s a bad influence on you, Charles. You’ll never wed if you carry on like Mansfield.”

“We’re not children any longer, Aunt,” Charles said in a mild voice. “Besides, you enjoy Mansfield’s tales of life in the sultan’s court. You can’t call them children’s stories.”

“I could tell you about the harem,” Mansfield said slyly, winking at Rosalind.

“Humph,” Lady Augusta said, pretending offence, but Rosalind caught the clear curiosity on her lined face.

St. Clare chimed in. “Lucien told me he wanted to check the roofing work on the cottages in the village. That was hours ago.”

Worry killed Rosalind’s appetite and she stopped pretending to eat. Something had happened. She just knew it. If the stubborn man had listened to her…

“That sounds like Hastings now,” Charles said when they heard a commotion from the direction of the Great Hall.

“Thoughtless man,” Lady Augusta said. “We’ve already finished our soup. I refuse to wait while Hastings eats his soup.”

Tickell entered the dining room. “Lady Rosalind—”

Rosalind bounded to her feet before the butler finished. “Where is he?”

“In his chamber. He asked for you to attend him there.”

Rosalind flew down the passages and up the stairs, barely registering her surroundings. Hastings was hurt. The words pounded through her brain. She burst into his chamber, her breath coming in gasps.

“I told Tickell not to bother you.”

“You’re bleeding.” Rosalind sought the source of the blood on his face. “Let me get my bag.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Then let me see.” Before he could argue, she moved closer, brushing a lock of hair from his forehead. She swallowed a laugh, turning it into a choking gasp at the last moment. “Is the rebuilding on schedule?”

His eyes narrowed as his gaze fastened on her face. “Everything is fine.”

“I have salve in my bag that will help the cut heal.”

“All right,” he growled. “If you must, but it’s not necessary.”

Rosalind nodded and hastened away. Her smile bloomed. He’d tripped over a log while playing with two children and was too embarrassed to admit his clumsiness. Still grinning, she burst into her chamber. The grin died a quick death.

“No!”

Her belongings were strewn over the floor, her linens ripped from the bed. Slowly, Rosalind made her way through the path of destruction. Her new silk gowns were tossed carelessly on the floor. Someone had shredded them beyond repair. She scooped up the broken remains of her hairbrush, the last remaining memento she had of her mother. Tears stung her eyes.

Why? The wanton destruction seemed so senseless, as if the person had destroyed her belongings in a jealous rage.

"Noir?" His plaintive meow started a frantic search. "Noir, where are you?"

Another meow sounded, and a small black head poked from under a pile of bed linens. Rosalind scooped him up, hugging the kitten to her chest. "Thank goodness you're all right. I bet you saw who did this." She stroked a finger over his head until he started to purr.

Sighing, she placed Noir on the bare feather mattress and searched for the bell to ring for help. The maid announced her arrival with a brief knock on the door.

"Come in," Rosalind called.

Janet slipped through the door and came to a stunned halt. "Lady Hastings, what happened?"

"My room was like this when I arrived."

"I'll call another maid to help clean up. You'll want fresh linens for the bed too." Janet turned to the door. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Rosalind sighed as she started to pick up her treasured knickknacks—a small china shepherdess with her head broken off, a glass vase and the selection of flowers it had once contained, and several mismatched shoes.

Janet returned with another maid sauntering in her wake. The maid's ample chest heaved with a put-upon sigh when she saw the mess to clear.

"I checked with the other maids," Janet said. "None of them saw anyone enter your chamber. And Beth turned down your bed."

"I did. Everything was in order when I left." Beth circled the room in a slow, leisurely gait. "You've got enemies, you has."

Rosalind bit back a retort. The woman had to state the obvious. "If you would make my bed, I'll help Janet sweep the floor. Make sure you shake the linens well before you take them away. A little more glass and broken china on my floor won't do any harm. Here, I'll shift Noir for you so you can make the bed." She put the kitten in a corner, gave him a scrap of ribbon to play with, and told him sternly to stay out of the way.

The cleanup took two hours and, by the time they finished, Rosalind's back ached. Thankful they were done, she smiled at Janet and Beth. "Thank you."

"'Tis no trouble, my lady," Janet murmured. "Sleep well."

The maid’s comment made Rosalind realize how late it was. Oh, goodness! She’d completely forgotten about the salve for Hastings. She hesitated before deciding against returning. Hastings hadn’t wanted her to fuss over him. Perhaps tomorrow. A yawn escaped before she could contain it. Although she wished she could sink onto her bed and drift to sleep, she had things to do. Determination solidified inside as she ushered the maids out. If it took her the rest of the night, she intended to discover the secret passage that led from her room. It was the obvious and only answer to the clandestine comings and goings from her chamber.

Rosalind started at her door and worked her way around to her bed. She examined each portion of the wall in minute detail. She tapped the walls, listening for a telltale hollowness. Even though logic told her she’d find the passage low, she dragged a chair over to the wall and stood on tiptoes to tap above her head. Nothing. Rosalind doggedly continued her search, climbing up on the chair, scrambling back off. Still nothing. She bit her bottom lip in vexation. Her knuckles throbbed from the constant tapping, but she continued. There was a passage here. She knew it. There was no other way for someone to gain such easy access to her room. She paused mid-tap. Unless one of the maids was the culprit?

Rosalind rocked back on her heels, considered the possibility and discarded it. It would be difficult for one of the maids to spirit her clothes away and destroy her belongings without others seeing or taking part in the mischief.

The search continued, Rosalind working while her mind twisted the puzzle, probing for answers.

The dull, echoing thud didn’t register at first. She stopped in front of a bureau. It looked heavy and unwieldy, but determination bade she make her search a thorough one. With a loud, unladylike grunt, she yanked the bureau. It moved surprisingly easily considering the size. She paused to take a deep breath, grasped the corners firmly, and tugged again. Small rollers attached to the bottom of the furniture aided its quick and effortless movement. A draft, a whisper of wind ran across her face, tugging tendrils of her hair. Rosalind gasped. Excitement pulsed through her veins. Tiredness dropped away as she held a candle aloft to study the gaping hole in the wall where the bureau had stood.

“Yes.” The grin of success spread across her face. The bureau was part of the wall, and the rollers on the bottom allowed easy, almost noiseless

entry to her chamber. On the rear, there was a sturdy handle to help the person exiting her chamber pull the bureau back into place with ease.

"I knew it." A job well done. She turned, picked up her candle, and plunged inside the black hole.

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Lucien turned on his side, trying to find a comfortable spot. His head ached as if someone was jabbing a dozen needles into his forehead. Although he'd told Rosalind not to bother with the salve, he could do with something to ease the pain now. He grunted. Who would have thought a simple fall would cause so much discomfort?

He flopped over on his other side, sending the covers flying from the bed, and stared up at the playful nymphs that cavorted on the painting above his bed. He cursed low and soft with frustration. The curvy blonde nymphs reminded him of Rosalind.

A soft, insistent tap jerked him from the dangerous thoughts. He sat up, listening intently. He'd almost decided the noise had been his imagination when it sounded again. The noise was coming from inside the wall.

Lucien slid from bed and pulled on a pair of breeches. The noise sounded again, but farther away. Gradually the tapping receded. He snatched up a candle, fumbled for a tinderbox, lit the candle and slipped from his room. He paused to listen. Yes. There it was again. Maybe Rosalind was right. It seemed as if there was someone behind the wall. It could be a person or a creature of some sort. Either way, he intended to learn their identity.

He stalked the length of the dimly lit corridor, following the progress of the muffled thumps and thuds. Holding the candle aloft, he studied the wall closely. He was unable to discern anything out of the ordinary. The wall appeared the same all the way along.

He tapped the wall lightly with one knuckle. A muffled shriek rent the air, followed by a mighty crash. The wall where he was standing flew open. An apparition in white flew at him, arms outstretched. The ghostly scream made the hair at the back of his neck lift. Lucien took an instinctive step back.

"Hastings!" the creature cried.

Lucien peered closer. "Rosalind?"

“Oh, you gave me a start! Never mind, I intended to find you anyway. Look what I’ve found.” She gestured at the black hole behind her.

They both heard footsteps from a lower level at the same time.

“Quick. Come out of there and we’ll shut the door.” Lucien made rapid work of placing the wall back, before he hustled Rosalind farther down the passage.

Rosalind looked back over her shoulder. “Who is it?” she whispered.

“I don’t know, but whoever it is, I think we should keep our discovery to ourselves.” He urged her down the passage.

Rosalind dug in her heels. “Whose discovery?”

Lucien took one look at her indignant face and wanted to laugh. Her blond hair, which was usually immaculate, stood up in all directions. A cobweb covered her face and her nightgown was gray with dust.

The hollow echo of footsteps on the wooden floor came closer. Lucien frowned. They wouldn’t make it back to his chamber in time. The unknown person would pass them in a few moments. And Lucien would bet they, whoever they were, would have endless questions about Rosalind’s appearance.

Acting quickly, he pressed Rosalind against the wall. He ignored her squeak, holding his candle up to survey her face. He wiped a smudge of dirt off her cheek with his free hand. Despite the gray tinge of dust, the gown glowed like a signal fire, giving away exactly what she’d been up to. A good thing she was so tiny. If he kept them out of direct candlelight they might pass inspection. His larger frame would hide most of the dust on her nightgown. His breath hissed out as he saw something else illuminated by the candlelight.

Her breasts.

Lucien squeezed his eyes shut but the vision remained imprinted in his mind. “Hell,” he muttered. He placed his candle on the floor and stepped away from her intoxicating scent. The floral perfume was driving him crazy, making him think things he had no right to think.

“What is it?” she whispered, closing the gap between them.

Lucien groaned under his breath. “Nothing. Be quiet. I’m trying to listen.”

The footsteps came closer. Damn. He’d have to…

The person paused, probably when whoever it was saw them. Lucien looked down at Rosalind. Her face was barely discernible in the dim light,

but his mind filled in the details. Rosalind had eyes the color of a pale blue forget-me-not, lips rosy as a freshly picked apple, and a determined chin and heart-stirring smile.

His head lowered. He heard her small gasp and smelled the warm womanly scent of her. Then his lips covered hers. He drank in her second gasp of surprise, his hand curving behind her head to draw her closer. Just one taste while they let their silent watcher draw his or her own conclusions. But one taste only fed his growing hunger. One more kiss, and then he'd stop.

"Cuz, don't you know they have bedrooms for that sort of thing?" Warm amusement colored Charles's voice.

Lucien loosened his hold on Rosalind. Blood thrummed through his veins. He hadn't felt so alive for months, and the realization galled him. He took a step back before he allowed himself to glance at Rosalind. Even though she'd managed an impassive face, he sensed the yearning, the need to take the kiss a step further. He forced himself to think of Francesca and his plans to find her killer before returning to his estates in Italy.

"Am I interrupting?" Charles cocked a brow and puffed on his pipe, sending a cloud of smoke into the air.

Irritation and a dose of self-recrimination bubbled inside Lucien. Of course he was, and Charles knew it. Lucien bit back a curse, knowing he should feel thankful his cousin had come along to interrupt what would've been an irretrievable step. He frowned. Still, damned odd that Charles had appeared at that exact moment, especially since his chambers were in the opposite wing.

Lucien picked up his candle and shone it in Charles's direction. "What are you doing here?"

Charles glanced at Rosalind and visibly hesitated.

"Well?"

"I've been…visiting," Charles said in a low voice.

"Visiting whom?" Rosalind piped up.

Lucien's anger abated as he smothered a laugh. Charles had come from the direction of the servants' quarters and no doubt a warm bed. A simple explanation.

Lucien decided to take pity on him. "Charles is friendly with some of the servants. Sometimes they play cards or the dice."

"Oh," Rosalind said.

“What are you doing up so late?” Charles asked.

“We couldn’t sleep so we went for a walk in the gardens.” He curled an arm around Rosalind’s waist and drew her against his side, taking care to keep her from Charles’s full scrutiny. Touching her felt natural. Right. Think of Francesca, he told himself with a surge of panic. He pictured her face easily enough, but the look of approval on her smiling face threw him.

“I’ll bid you good night then.” With a bow, Charles sauntered away.

“What do you think?” Rosalind whispered.

Lucien looked down at her intent face. So, she’d thought Charles’s explanation strange too. The woman was astute as well as persistent. And a menace to his mission. “I’m not sure,” he said slowly. “The servants’ rooms are in the direction he came from.”

“But you don’t know for sure. We should check in the morning. Ask a few questions.”

She was right. But he didn’t see Charles as a killer. The man seemed foppish with his love of lace and cosmetics. “Come,” he said. “It’s late. I’ll escort you to your chamber.”

“But don’t you wish to explore the passage?”

“Not now. In the morning.”

She accepted his arm and nodded. “That makes sense. I can’t wait to see where it leads.”

Lucien halted to nail her with a glare. “It’s too dangerous for you. I’ll do the exploring.” The thought of her wandering alone in the passages made his blood run cold. He’d stake his life the passage connected with the smugglers’ tunnels at the beach and perhaps the North Tower. It was the only thing that made sense. All the booty he’d discovered during his explorations had disappeared between one visit and his next. He knew for a fact the contraband didn’t leave via sea or along the beach. That left only one alternative.

“That’s not fair. I discovered the passage.”

Now was not the time to argue. He took Rosalind’s arm and propelled her to her chamber. *Get rid of her. Go and investigate now, before the smugglers discover someone has breached the passage.* A snort escaped. Hell, who was he trying to fool? Each minute spent with Rosalind was a test of willpower. One taste of her lips left him craving more.

At Rosalind’s chamber, he opened the door and stood back for her to enter.

“I don’t believe it,” she muttered.

Lucien followed her gaze. The room and its contents were in a shambles. Her belongings covered the floor, the bedding ripped from the bed, the sheets shredded as if someone had thrown a temper tantrum.

Rosalind stomped inside her room. She rotated to face him, her face a mask of fury. “This is the second time tonight. That’s why I never returned with the salve for your face. The maids and I spent almost two hours clearing the mess.” She screwed up her face and, alarmed, Lucien wondered if she was going to cry. “The only gown I own is the one I wore tonight. All the others were shredded.” She swiped a hand over her face.

Damn. She was going to cry. What was he going to do with a weepy female?

“Where am I going to sleep?” she demanded with a sniff. “It’s so late, I can’t ring for a maid again.”

“You can sleep in my room.” Lucien stilled as he registered his words. He’d said them without forethought, but he could hardly take them back now.

“In your room?”

“Yes,” he said gruffly. He headed for the connecting door, holding the candle to light the way while he unlocked it. Allowing Rosalind in his chamber was a bad idea. On the threshold, he hesitated. Rosalind didn’t seem to notice his diffidence as she surveyed his private rooms.

“What will I sleep in?” she asked.

His mind groped for an acceptable answer. “One of my shirts?” he finally suggested.

Her smile made his heart beat a little faster. “Thank you.”

Lucien shook himself mentally and crossed the Persian carpet to the door of his dressing room. Minutes later, he produced a white linen shirt. He paused in consternation. Rosalind was eyeing his bed with fascination. He felt a tinge of amusement as he jerked his gaze away. *Just wait until she notices the cavorting nymphs.*

“Where will you sleep?”

“There’s a couch in my dressing room.”

Before he could speak, Rosalind darted into the dressing room. “You can’t sleep on that. The mattress is as hard as an oak tree.”

Lucien sighed. She was going to be difficult. He just knew it.

“Your bed is big enough for two.”

Did she have to point that out?

A plaintive meow sounded from the other side of the connecting door, saving him from a reply.

“It’s Noir,” Rosalind said.

Lucien grabbed the chance to escape, if only for a few minutes. “I’ll get him.” He unlocked the connecting door, spied the kitten by Rosalind’s bed, and played chase for several minutes. Finally, he cornered the kitten and returned to his bedroom at a much slower pace. Share the bed. He wasn’t ready for this. Not at all.

Visions raced through his head without warning, visions that had little to do with sleeping. He paused, shocked at his thoughts. “Hell’s teeth,” he muttered.

He set the kitten down on the floor and tried to think when his feelings had shifted. The change had been subtle and sneaked up on him. He might feel an attraction for her, but that didn’t mean he had to follow his inclinations.

“I changed in your dressing room.” Rosalind walked to the bed without the slightest bit of hesitation, her legs bare to his gaze.

And he looked. He couldn’t help it. His blood roared through his veins, his heart stuttering before resuming a rapid tattoo. Hands itched to touch her generous curves.

Her legs were long and slender for such a tiny thing. She perched on the edge of his bed and calmly unbound her hair. Pale golden locks fell over her shoulders one by one, glinting in the light of the second candle she’d lit while he was away.

“Which side should I sleep on?” Her voice sounded matter-of-fact, as if they’d done this a thousand times before.

Lucien grimaced, still hesitating while Rosalind finished loosening her hair and pulled back the covers. His gaze fastened on her legs and never moved until they disappeared under the covers.

“Shall I blow the candle out?”

Lucien cleared his throat. “No, I’ll take it to the dressing room with me.”

“You are coming back?” She patted the space on the feather mattress beside her. “There’s plenty of room for both of us.”

Chapter Thirteen

How long until morning?

Lucien tugged at the neck of his linen shirt, trying to ease the tightness as he stared at the English mouse in bemusement. It felt a bit like a hangman's noose, he thought with a flash of black humor.

"Well?"

She was pushy and oblivious to fear. Lucien still couldn't get past the fact his scarred face did nothing to scare her off. Most women turned away when they spied his damaged cheek. Even men averted their gaze, but not his English mouse.

He felt the weight of a stare and knew she was watching him. Again. Slowly, he turned. Her lips looked soft and pink in the candlelight. The taste of her mouth simmered in his memory.

"You need sleep," he murmured, still eyeing her lips and feeling unbearably tempted. "You'll rest better if I sleep in the dressing room." With that decided, he stepped toward his dressing room.

He couldn't leave! She wouldn't let him. Not when she was so close to finding out what went on between a man and wife in their bedroom. There had to be more than sleeping in the same room. She tossed back the covers and jumped off the bed. He was not sleeping in the dressing room.

Rosalind seized his arm and planted her feet on the floor like an anchor. Her hand connected with the warm, smooth skin of his wrist.

"Don't go."

Images formed immediately, and she let them flow. Embraced them and was pleasantly surprised. Instead of the face of the woman, she saw her own. Rosalind closed her eyes, concentrating hard, savoring the vision. Her heart sang at the victory, although it was a small one.

"You don't know what you're asking of me." Lucien's voice was tortured. She felt a tinge of shame, but not enough to halt the fight for her marriage or her determination to jolt Lucien from his lonely corner. She was

alone too. They needed each other. Her hand dropped from his arm. “You’re my husband.”

“I’m not a good husband.” Lucien turned to her. His face blazed with passion, with pain. “I was married before.” His voice caught and she saw his throat work.

From her visions, she knew of the other woman, but actually hearing him talk of his wife made her seem more real and a threat. A spurt of jealousy raced through Rosalind, but not enough to kill her thirst for knowledge freely given. “What happened?”

“She died.” His face appeared carved with pain. “It was my fault.”

Without thought, Rosalind reached to comfort him. She grabbed his waist and fell against his chest so he had to catch her. Impressions bombarded her. It was as if the dam had burst, releasing slivers of the past. Emotions, both heartfelt and painful, rushed through her mind like towering waves during a storm. Tumultuous. Powerful. She gasped, struggling to turn thoughts to words.

“Why?” She grimaced against his shirt at the totally inadequate response. Lucien blamed himself for the death. Yet she knew her husband to be a caring man, one who worked tirelessly in the village, a man who took the time to play with the village children.

“Francesca died.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t your fault,” Rosalind said, her voice firm and sure.

“For a long time after Francesca and I married, I remembered nothing of my past. Then fragments returned, but they made no sense. Francesca and I discussed it, and she persuaded me we should travel to England and search for answers. She was expecting a child. I told her traveling would be dangerous, but she was insistent. I agreed because I couldn’t bear to be apart from her. We traveled by boat, then by land. Bandits attacked us late one night.” Lucien faltered, his voice layered with torment.

Rosalind pressed her cheek to his chest. His body was tight. Tense. It was wrong to push for details when it was obvious he was in pain, but she needed to know.

“What happened?” she whispered, pressing her body even closer, offering comfort in the only way she knew.

“Francesca…she was shot.” He swallowed audibly. “She died in my arms.”

Tears of sympathy built at the back of her eyes. Poor Lucien, losing his wife and child that way. “Were the bandits caught?”

The question tossed Lucien firmly back in the past, back to the night he’d lost Francesca. The fear. Anger. The pain he’d felt at the moment he realized Francesca was gone. The gnawing desperation for revenge…

“I’d give anything to bathe in warm, scented water,” Francesca had said with a heartfelt sigh. “My bones ache from the journey today.”

Concern crinkled Lucien’s brow. He studied Francesca’s pale, travel-stained face and felt instant guilt. “I knew we should have stopped at that last inn. *Cara,* you should have said something.”

“Pooh, it was only midday,” Francesca scoffed, making light of the extra miles they’d traveled. But Lucien noticed how her hands crept up to massage the small of her back. “We are only two days from the coast,” she continued. “It didn’t make sense to halt early. Besides, we’ve stopped now.”

Lucien glanced around the rough camp they’d made in a clearing. It wasn’t the ideal situation for Francesca and their unborn child. Several bushes provided shelter from the prevailing wind, and their camp was far enough off the track to escape the attention of passing travelers. A small fire was burning within a circle of rocks. The two men who’d journeyed with them from the Bacci estate had gathered together leaves and grasses for bedding, and now that darkness had fallen, one was turning a rabbit on a spit over the fire. The scent of the roast meat made Lucien’s stomach grumble in protest. It seemed a long time since their last meal.

Although the need to fill the holes in his memory was strong and nagged at him, Francesca and his unborn child were more important. “Come, *cara.* Let me rub your back.”

Francesca’s rich laugh rang out. “Stop worrying! I’ll be fine after a good night’s sleep.”

The distinct clip-clop of a horse’s hooves halted their discussion, and they both turned. Lucien picked up his flintlock pistol and held it at the ready as three men rode into their campsite.

Oberon whinnied, pawing the ground in agitation. Lucien stiffened when he noticed the way their hats were tugged low over their faces. They traveled light with no luggage. He snatched up his sword in his free hand and edged back, out of the light of the fire, gesturing silently for Francesca to do the same.

“*Signor,* they’re armed!” one of their men shouted. He seized his musket and held it at the ready.

“Bandits,” Francesca cried, grabbing a saddlebag and ducking for cover behind a leafy thicket not far from where they stood.

One of the horsemen cursed. A shot reverberated through the clearing, the acrid scent of gunpowder filling the air. Another followed an instant later. Both servants fell to the ground and remained there, unmoving. Obscured by the smoke of the gunpowder, Lucien darted behind the thicket, dread filling him until he located Francesca.

“Run,” he ordered his wife. God, how were they going to get out of this? Nothing must happen to Francesca. “Hide in the trees while I distract them.”

“No!” Francesca pulled a primed pistol from her saddlebag. She peeked cautiously around the undergrowth. “I won’t leave you. There aren’t meant to be bandits here. We checked!”

From experience, Lucien knew it was pointless to argue with Francesca. “Keep low,” he said tersely. “Your white blouse catches the light.”

“Told ya we should have crept up on them,” one of the horsemen snarled. “Hawk will have our skins if we don’t carry out his orders.”

The familiar accent tickled at Lucien’s memory. It wasn’t Italian or French.

“English,” Francesca whispered. “That doesn’t make sense.”

Who the hell was Hawk? Lucien tensed, his heart pumping fear and anger through his veins.

“Can you hear them?” Francesca asked.

The uneasiness in her voice echoed his apprehension. Nothing about this situation seemed right. His stomach cinched tight, and he listened intently before shaking his head. “Wait there,” he murmured. “I’ll see if I can pick at least one of them off.” Lucien knew they were there…waiting. The tension stretched tighter within him. Damn it, he couldn’t even hear the horses. He moved cautiously, trying to nail their positions.

A shot rang out. An instant later pain flooded his shoulder. He fell.

“Lucien!” Francesca screamed.

Lucien scrambled to his feet, fighting the lethargy creeping through his body. Only a flesh wound. He pressed the heel of his hand to the wound and searched for the sword he’d dropped. He’d need it once he’d fired the shot in his pistol.

“There!” one of the horsemen cried. “There she is.”

Lucien’s head jerked up. He saw a flash of white. A musket fired. Francesca screamed and dropped to the ground.

“Got ’er,” a man said in clear satisfaction.

“Someone’s coming,” another said.

Galloping hooves told of their rapid departure.

Lucien staggered over to Francesca. Panic like he’d never known roared through him. “Francesca? Francesca!”

He dragged her close, cradling her in his arms, searching frantically to find the source of the wound. The blouse ripped easily to reveal a gaping hole. She breathed in quick, shallow gasps, and Lucien heard a rattle deep in her chest. No! A chill raced up his spine with each labored breath Francesca took.

“Lucien.” Her hands gripped him painfully. Her dark eyes glittered in the scant light cast by the fire.

“Yes, *cara.*” Lucien had to lean closer to hear. The blood kept rushing from the bullet hole in her chest. He had to stop it. He ignored the burning in his shoulder to press down on the wound site. Her pained groan tore at him. He must stop the bleeding. He must.

“Promise me. Go to England. Find St. Clare. Promise.”

“Don’t talk, *cara.* Save your strength. Let me tend your wound and stop the bleeding.”

“Too late,” Francesca gasped. “Promise.”

“Don’t leave me, damn it. I’m nothing without you. I love you, Francesca.”

“Go to St. Clare.”

“Yes, *cara.* But you will come with me. We’ll go together as we planned, to find my memories.”

“I’m going to die,” Francesca whispered painfully.

“No!” Horror screamed through his mind. He shuddered. He’d spoken the truth. Francesca made him whole. She’d saved him, giving him a name and her heart, and he loved her for it.

“You will find someone. Promise me you will find another to love.”

Another terrible rattle from deep inside her chest made him want to sob. “Never,” he said, his tone fierce.

“Yes. Love…you.” Every ounce of fight faded from her body. The life seeped from her beautiful eyes as he watched.

She was gone.

"No!" Lucien screamed. "No!" He shook Francesca fiercely, but it was too late. He cradled her close, burying his nose in her silky hair while the grief encompassed him.

"Hello, the camp!"

Lucien stiffened but didn't look up.

"I say, are you all right? We heard gunfire."

Lucien heard the jangle of the horses' harness, the low murmurs of several men. Footsteps ambled closer, and he sensed a man crouch beside him. He couldn't speak. Tears and anguish clogged his throat, making it difficult to breathe. Francesca was gone, and he didn't want to go on.

"Wilson, hold my horse," a calm voice said. "Let me look at her."

Lucien loosened his grip a fraction and glanced up. Tears filled his eyes and spilled down his cheeks. "She's dead. Francesca's gone."

"Do you know who did it?" another voice asked.

Lucien swallowed, the sound audible. Painful. "No."

"You're bleeding too," the man with the calm voice said. "Let Wilson hold Francesca while I take a look at your shoulder."

Lucien blinked. He couldn't feel his shoulder. He'd forgotten about it. The reminder brought an arrow of pain that increased when he moved. The throb helped him focus, cleared his thoughts. Hate bloomed along with the need for revenge. A man called Hawk had ordered the attack, and the man hailed from England. He would find this man. Yes, he would search out Hawk and make him pay dearly.

"Lucien." A hand grasped his forearm. "Lucien!" Rosalind's voice intruded into his memories. "I asked you if the bandits were caught."

Lucien shook his head in an effort to clear his mind, the pain still deep and soul wrenching. He coughed to move the lump in his throat. "They disappeared almost as soon as they attacked. Before Francesca died, she made me promise to come to England, to search for my past. She felt it was important I found the answers we were searching for. Besides," he said harshly, "the bandits who attacked us were English. Someone knew we were on our way to England and intended to stop us."

"English!" Rosalind gasped, springing away from Lucien and staring at him in consternation. "How do you know they were English? Couldn't they have been French?"

His look held disdain. “They spoke in English, with English accents. I’d say that was comprehensive proof. I have a name, Rosalind. An English name.”

“But why would English bandits attack you? What name?”

“Hawk.”

Everyone in the village feared Hawk. Lucien didn’t want to run foul of him. “Be careful of Hawk,” Rosalind said. “He’s dangerous.”

Lucien’s jaw worked, then he grabbed her by the arm and wrenched her about so her face was in the light. “What do you know of Hawk?”

Rosalind stared at him, horror spreading through her body like poison. If she told him the truth, he’d have her locked away. Just as her uncle and aunt had threatened when she tried to tell them the Duke they were maneuvering toward Miranda had no intention of marriage.

“Answer me, damn it.” He punctuated his words with shakes vigorous enough to make her head snap back and her teeth click together.

“I don’t know anything about a man called Hawk.” When he eased his grip, she wrenched away.

“Where did you hear his name?”

“I hear things when I’m treating the villagers. The people, *your people*, are frightened of him.”

“And that’s all?” Suspicion shaded his voice.

Rosalind ached to tell the truth but couldn’t. She just couldn’t. “That’s all. He’s dangerous. Brutal. I think he runs the smugglers’ ring.”

“I’ve heard rumors.” Lucien stalked the length of the room and back. “I want you to tell me if you hear anything while you’re in the village. But don’t ask questions. If I find you’ve put yourself in danger…” He trailed off, but his meaning was clear.

It was obvious Lucien intended to wreak revenge on the man, Hawk. What about the danger he placed himself in? She hadn’t gone to all this trouble to find a husband only to lose him. Her hands screwed up the fabric of the shirt she wore, then smoothed it down her legs. “What about the danger to you? You shouldn’t work alone. I can help you.”

“Keep your pert nose out of my affairs. If you don’t, I’ll lock you in your room and place a guard outside.”

Rosalind’s eyes narrowed. So he’d threatened before. Then she scanned his hard, unyielding face and knew this time, he meant every word. She’d go mad locked away in her room. “All right,” she acquiesced. But behind

her back, her fingers were crossed and, according to her cousin, Miranda, that negated a fib.

Rosalind meant to do everything in her power to keep her husband safe.

"Get back into bed," he growled.

"What about you?"

"Never mind me. I'll blow the candle out as soon as you're in bed."

Rosalind had no alternative but to obey. Feeling wretched and a failure as a wife, she slid beneath the sheets and lay in stiff silence while Lucien extinguished the candles. She heard the soft whisper of his footfalls, the click of a door, and knew he was gone.

A tear trickled down her cheek. She was hopeless at attracting a man. She wiped the tear away with the linen sheet and stilled. The linens smelled of Lucien, of green meadows and the outdoors. She sniffed, suddenly feeling better. At least she was sleeping in Lucien's room, in his bed. That was progress.

***

Rosalind woke late, which was little surprise, given the hour when she'd finally fallen asleep. She threw back the covers and wandered through the connecting door into her own chamber.

"Good morning, my lady." Beth, the maid, glanced at Rosalind. A smirk spread across her face as she scanned Rosalind's bare legs. "Had a good night, then?"

Rosalind gasped, feeling her face heat. She tugged at the bottom of Lucien's shirt. "Thank you for cleaning my room."

A sly look slid across Beth's face. "Lord Hastings asked me to clean it for you."

The maid was baiting her and, despite a desire to throttle her, Rosalind nodded briefly and began a search for clothes. Bother. When she saw Lucien again, she was going to demand he take action. This wasn't right! These mischievous pranks wouldn't have happened if Mary was here. Lucien wasn't doing much to help her find Mary either. That would change too.

Ten minutes later, she sighed and looked down at her mismatched outfit. She couldn't wait to hear Lady Augusta's opinion about the way her brown open robe clashed with the yellow petticoat. She looked like a bumblebee.

Rosalind slowed as she approached the Blue Drawing Room. Perhaps she'd try to creep from the castle before Lady Augusta emerged from her room. She held her breath when she tiptoed past, only letting it out when she exited the Great Hall and stepped into the early morning sunshine. She turned down the overgrown path that meandered along the cliff top. A lively breeze tugged her hair. A small white gull glided and swooped over the bay, drawing a laugh from her when it dived at another, causing a flurry of indignant squawks and flapping wings.

Dew soaked the bottom of her cloak but she carried on, navigating the slippery path with care. The day was far too lovely to spend indoors, dwelling on Lucien and the elusive Hawk.

The thought of Hawk brought a frown. She needed to learn more about the man, and that meant talking to the villagers. Gaining their trust had taken time, but she needed to push harder. Her frown deepened. Unfortunately, the blacksmith's wife seemed suspicious of the way she treated her patients. Yesterday when she'd stopped by the bakery shop to buy a treat for Billy and Harry, Rosalind had interrupted a whispered conversation. The whispers had resumed as soon as she left to check on Harry and change his dressings.

Harry and Billy's mother gave her grudging admittance when she visited, but Rosalind was positive the woman bore suspicions about her too. Mary had always distracted the patients Rosalind treated to reduce the chance of someone discovering her gift. Not that Mary's presence had helped once Miranda and Thomas spread rumors of witchcraft. Her cousin hadn't appreciated Thomas's interest in her and had grabbed the opportunity to besmirch her reputation. After that everyone in Stow-on-the-Wold had called Rosalind a witch.

"Mary, I wish I knew where you were," she whispered. "I miss you." Tears blurred her vision as she halted at the edge of the path and stared out to sea.

The rustle of clothing behind her made her start, but before she could turn, Rosalind felt a shove in the middle of her back. Her boots skidded on the wet grass. She screamed. Her arms flapped for balance, but she couldn't prevent herself from tumbling down the slope.

Terror clogged her throat as she clawed for purchase. Twisting her body, she grabbed at jutting rocks, scraping skin from her hands. Small fragments of rock slid from under her feet, rattling as they rolled down the cliff.

Another rock. She grasped and clung. Hell and damnation. It hurt. She drew a sobbing breath deep into her lungs. Waves crashed against the cliff base far below. Sea spray filled the air. *Don't look down.*

She looked down and snuffled. Panic struck a fierce blow. Her arms ached…throbbed from gripping the out-hanging rock. Drops of blood dripped from her right hand.

Rosalind dragged her gaze from the razor-sharp rocks and surging waves below that seemed to beckon her. She looked up. She hadn't fallen far, but even so, the climb to the top was daunting.

Her feet probed for nooks and crevices in the rocks to use as steps. Gingerly, she eased her weight upward, trying to hoist her ugly brown skirts out of the way so she didn't tangle her legs. Another rock. She needed to find a ledge strong enough to hold her weight. Sweat coated her forehead, dripping down her face. The moisture itched and tickled. She craved a means to scratch the irritant, to wipe her face clean. She laughed, and the sound held an edge of hysteria.

The throb in her arms reminded her she needed to move. Now. Grimly, she continued the slow inch-by-inch crawl up the cliff face. From the corner of her eye, she caught a flash of color.

"Hello? Is anyone there?"

A shower of small pebbles rained down upon her. Dust clouded her vision. Squinting to protect her eyes, she peered anxiously up to the cliff path. No. She hadn't been mistaken. There was the flash of color again.

"Help!" she screamed. "Help! I'm down here."

Fragments fell from the cliff top. Clinging to the rocks, there was no hope of avoiding them. When a stone the size of her fist rolled over the edge and bounced twice before striking her on the shoulder, she stopped shouting. The nudge she'd felt in the middle of her back wasn't fevered imagination. Someone wanted her to perish in the sea below.

Rosalind fumbled for the next crevice in the rock face. She intended to lever herself up this cliff if it was the last thing she did. Her arms trembled, each breath sounded loud and gasping. Her gown clung to clammy skin. Another foothold. Scramble. Heave. The motions took on a sequence that she concentrated on fiercely.

Her foot felt for the next. And found nothing. She lifted her leg higher, searching blindly for the next step. She found it. The distance to this one was greater than she'd attempted thus far. She strained, reaching higher for

a handhold to take her closer to safety. Her toes found the indent in the rock. She crammed her foot in and pushed and dragged her body upward.

The tiny fissure crumbled beneath the weight of her feet. A strangled gasp escaped. Without volition, her gaze dropped to the sea and the jagged rocks. Her feet fumbled for traction. She slipped again, her knee bashing against the rocks as she dangled above the hungry sea.

"Oh, God," she prayed. She didn't want to die. She wanted to hold the babies she had once seen in a vision. Her babies. Lucien's babies.

A sob burst free. The pain in her knee was excruciating. A tear trickled down her face. Then suddenly, she found a break in the rock surface. With the weight taken off her arms, she slumped against the cold, damp rocks and looked up. It wasn't far. She could do this. And grimly, she resumed her climb, chanting under her breath, trying to ignore the pain and fatigue plaguing her body.

"I can do this. For Lucien. For our son."

The last foot was the hardest.

"For our son," she gasped, pushing away the persistent aching of her knee, and the wet, clammy feel of her gown. "I can do this."

With a last surge of energy, Rosalind pulled herself over the lip of the cliff and lay face down on the path, gasping for breath. Her fingers curled around a clump of grass as she savored the feel of solid ground beneath her body. The sun beat down on her head, somewhere a gull shrieked, and she heard the faint drone of a bee in the hedge on the other side of the path. The dust tickled her nose so she finally moved, struggling to sit up. She rubbed a grubby, scratched hand over her face, reveling in the fact she could. It was good to be alive.

Rosalind pushed to her feet. Discomfort radiated from her right knee and when she tried to take a step, she almost fell.

"St. Bridget's ears," she muttered, picking one of her uncle's more colorful phrases. How was she going to get back to the castle?

She tried another step, and found if she didn't think too hard, she could manage. Just. She dragged her aching body toward the castle.

As she staggered around an overgrown bush, she came to an abrupt halt. The wrench in her knee brought tears to her eyes.

There were several people in the formal gardens that spread out from the more modern part of the castle. She squinted into the sun.

“Hell’s teeth,” she cursed again, and this time it was even more heartfelt. Lady Sophia. The persistent throbbing in her knee forbade backtracking. Rosalind clenched her teeth, stuck her nose in the air, and hobbled forward.

The animated chatter died. One by one, heads turned to stare in consternation, before the muffled whispers started.

Rosalind felt her cheeks heat. She looked like a ragamuffin. Dirt covered her ugly brown skirts, and her underdress bore a rip the length of her arm. On the final part of her ascent, she’d lost one shoe. Oh, yes. It was no wonder everyone gawked. Pride lifted her chin as she continued her labored progress to the castle.

Charles and Mansfield hurried up to her.

“Rosalind? What happened?” Charles cried in horror.

“I was p…” She trailed off, thinking better of her instinct to tell the truth. She’d tell Lucien, but she trusted him. She wasn’t so certain of others. “I fell,” she said.

She heard Lady Sophia snicker and whisper to the lady beside her. Her cheeks flushed anew.

“Are you all right?” Charles appeared anxious.

“I’ll be fine once I get to my chamber.”

“Let me assist you,” Mansfield said, and before she could answer, he swept her into his arms. “Open the doors for me, Charles.”

Rosalind heard the renewed laughter and chatter as they entered the castle. “I can walk.”

“Nonsense,” Charles said. “You look as white as the swans swimming in the pond over there. Let Mansfield carry you.” He paused to summon a servant. “Bring some warm water up to Lady Hastings’s chamber. And ask Tickell to summon Hastings.”

“Thank you. I can walk the rest of the way.”

Mansfield smiled. “And deprive me of my lovely burden? Lady Hastings, you are cruel. Charles, tell her to desist from her protests.”

“But I’m dirtying your clothes,” Rosalind wailed, noting the patch of mud on his pristine powder blue breeches.

“A badge of honor.” A dimple at the corner of his mouth winked as he fought a grin. The smile broke forth anyway.

Rosalind sighed, but couldn’t resist his good-natured smile. The man was a serious flirt. That much was clear.

“It’s no use trying to talk Mansfield out of his mission.” Charles followed them along the passage leading to Rosalind’s room. “He’s very stubborn.”

“I’d noticed,” Rosalind said dryly. “I only hope we don’t meet with Lady Augusta.”

No sooner had she uttered the words than a shriek of horror echoed down the Long Gallery. “What on earth are you doing? Put Lady Hastings down this instant.”

“I warned you,” Rosalind said.

Mansfield didn’t slacken his pace. “Charles will deal with Lady Gussie,” he said with a wicked smile.

Rosalind found herself grinning back. Over Mansfield’s shoulder, she saw Charles speaking earnestly to Lady Augusta.

Lady Augusta’s snort of disbelief exploded from the other end of the gallery.

“Don’t worry about Lady Augusta. Her bark is ferocious but no one has died from her bite. Ah, Hastings,” Mansfield said. “Your wife has had a fall.”

Rosalind bit back a yelp when his arms tightened. Then Mansfield set her gently on her feet.

“I’ll take it from here,” Lucien said brusquely.

A taut silence enveloped the group.

Rosalind smiled, hoping to break the tension. “Thank you for coming to my rescue, Mansfield. Please thank Charles for me.”

“What did Charles do to earn your gratitude?” Lucien demanded.

Mansfield grinned. “Headed off Lady Augusta.”

Lucien nodded abruptly. “Thanks.” He swept Rosalind off her feet and stepped along the passage until he reached his room. He shouldered the door open, then paused. “Mansfield, can you summon a maid?”

He carried her over to his bed. “What happened?”

Rosalind frowned, recalling her impressions before she spoke. “I went for a walk along the cliff path. Lucien, someone pushed me over the edge.”

Lucien studied his wife carefully. She didn’t seem badly injured. “Where does it hurt most? Can you walk?”

Rosalind slid off the edge of the bed and attempted to move. After hobbling one step, she pulled up. “My knee. I’ve injured my knee.”

“There was a heavy dew this morning.”

“Are you saying the fall was my imagination?”

“Not at all,” Lucien said. “Too many strange things have happened lately. But why are you so certain someone pushed you? Did you see anyone behind you?”

Rosalind limped back to his bed and sat beneath the colored dome depicting dancing cherubs. “No, I didn’t see anyone. It was more an impression.”

“This wouldn’t have happened if you’d taken a footman with you.”

Rosalind’s gasp was loud and punctuated with a glare.

A maid knocked on the door and entered bearing an ewer of warm water. It was the maid who winked and smirked in the direction of his groin whenever she caught him on his own. For once, he was glad Rosalind was present.

“Will that be all, Lord Hastings?” the maid asked, her voice low and sultry.

“Yes, thank you,” Rosalind answered.

The maid curtseyed and slid a knowing grin in his direction before sauntering from the room.

Lucien settled the ewer on a small oak table and moved closer to Rosalind. “Lift your skirt and I’ll take a look at your knee.”

She hesitated, then lifted the brown woolen skirts so he had a clear view of her grubby, ripped stockings.

“These will need to come off.” Lucien unfastened her garter and peeled the once-white stocking down her leg to reveal an angry red gash on her knee. He prodded above the knee gently. “Does that hurt?”

“A little,” Rosalind said. “I think it’s bruised. The rest of the cuts sting, but they should heal quickly.”

At least she spared him tears and hysterical crying. Lucien appreciated that in a woman. He cleansed her knee with warm water and a soft cloth.

“I have some salve in my room.” She started to move, but Lucien stayed her with one hand on her bare leg.

“I’ll get it.” Lucien sprang to his feet, pleased to leave the room. Her perfume filled his senses, enticing him to haul her into his arms, while her quiet bravery, when she was clearly in pain, won his admiration.

In Rosalind’s chamber, he came to a halt. He hadn’t asked her where she kept the salve. He hesitated before deciding to try the bag she toted to the village whenever she was treating the sick.

The staff had restored Rosalind's chamber to order, and Lucien noticed how few personal items she had in the room. There were no perfume pots and small glass jars. He wandered through to her dressing room during his search for her satchel. One dress hung on a rail. Made of coarse brown wool, it looked like servants' attire to him. He frowned, remembering Francesca's many gowns of silk and satin.

Lucien finally found the bag sitting by Rosalind's bed. The catch was open and the contents haphazardly arranged inside. He closed it and took the whole bag to let Rosalind find the salve.

"You found my bag," Rosalind said. "I wasn't sure it would still be there."

"You need to order gowns," Lucien said, his mind on the borrowed gown in her dressing room. As well as numerous gowns, Francesca had delighted in matching shawls, shoes and hats. Gloves too. He didn't remember seeing a single hat in Rosalind's chamber. "Summon the seamstress. She will come to you here." He opened her satchel. The array of herbs took him by surprise. "Do you use all of these?"

"Yes."

Dried twigs, tied together with a red ribbon, slid into a small groove inside the bag. Small jars filled with crushed leaves jostled for space with others containing pastes. All the jars bore neat labels.

"Which jar do you require?"

Rosalind pointed at one that held a white paste. "That should bring out the bruising."

He heard a sound behind him and turned his head. Noir slunk along the ground on his belly. His ears pricked, his compact body vibrated, ready to spring on his prey. Lucien smothered a chuckle. The tassels on his boots were in extreme danger.

The kitten leaped. Lucien caught him midair. A loud hiss resulted. "Steady there," he murmured. The kitten clawed at his jacket sleeve. "He's a ferocious beast."

"He likes to play. Usually it's the maids he terrorizes."

Lucien carefully disengaged the kitten's claws. He stilled. His eyes narrowed and he glanced at Rosalind. She stared back, her face expressionless.

"The kitten has extra toes."

Rosalind nodded.

“The servants? Have they noticed?”

Her chin edged upward. “I’m sure they have.”

Witch’s cat. The knowledge shimmered in the air between them.

“I’m keeping him. You’re not taking Noir away from me. He’s a baby. A harmless kitten.”

“That’s why you found him washed up on the beach. Someone tossed him in the sea to drown.”

“Lucien, he’s an animal with nothing magical about him.” Rosalind fought to contain her fears. Surely he wouldn’t take Noir from her? During her last trip down to the village, a young lad had skipped up to her and asked if she were a witch. His embarrassed mother had whisked him away, but she’d have to be blind not to notice fewer people were asking to see her.

“What about rumors? God, Rosalind, they still talk of burning witches at the stake.”

“I’m not a witch!” A sick feeling made her stomach sink. Was her gift to ruin life in St. Clare too?

“I never said you were. All I’m saying is to take care. Keep Noir out of sight. Don’t give people fuel for their gossip.”

Rosalind considered his words. “Are you saying I shouldn’t treat the people in the village if they are sick?”

“Yes. If that’s what it takes to keep you safe.”

Chapter Fourteen

Safe?

That implied Lucien cared. Hope sprang to life like a flower blooming after a winter thaw.

“I need you to show me where you found the entrance to the passage.”

Rosalind stood and limped after Lucien. A jarring pain shot down her leg, but she ignored it to concentrate on Lucien. “I will explore the passage with you.”

He made a tsking sound and scooped her up, carrying her next door to her room and dropping her lightly on the bed. “You couldn’t make it to your chamber on your own.”

Her mouth tightened at the excuse to exclude her. The hope that had fanned to life inside her withered with intense frustration.

“Stay here and rest.” His words were more like an order, no matter how politely he couched them. The calm face told her he expected her to follow his orders with no argument.

Rosalind decided to choose a better time to make her case. “The passage entrance is behind the bureau. It’s part of the wall, and it’s a simple matter of moving it to open the passage. There’s a handle on the back to secure it shut when you leave via my chamber.”

Lucien picked up her candle, lit it and followed her instructions. The bureau slid aside with a quiet groan. He ducked into the dark space revealed and vanished from sight.

Frustration burned within Rosalind. She hobbled to the opening in her wall and stuck her head inside. Cautious footsteps slowly receded and she glimpsed a brief flickering of candlelight before it, too, disappeared from sight. If she were Miranda, she would have a full-out tantrum.

Despite Lucien’s transparent doubt, someone had pushed her this morning. The sounds from the path above, the flash of color she’d glimpsed, and the tumble of rocks and stones that had rained down on her head replayed through her mind. A shudder worked down her body at the

remembered horror, the helpless sense of dangling above the needle-sharp rocks. With a grumpy sigh, she tugged the bureau back into place in case one of the maids entered her chamber and sat back to wait for her husband's return.

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Rest. Stay in bed for the morning.

Rosalind snorted in a manner that would've made both her aunt and Lady Augusta scowl if they'd heard the derisive sound. She paced to the window and yanked back the shutters. Out at sea, a mist had formed. A chill settled around her heart, and she tucked her shawl around her shoulders. It did nothing to ward off the cold sense of isolation. Lucien had found no sign of Mary, and now he expected her to laze around and rest her knee for another day while he explored the rest of the passage, the part he hadn't had time to reconnoiter the previous day.

Part of her hoped he'd find Mary alive and perhaps a little worse for wear, but with each passing day, it became less likely. Lord, she hated to admit defeat. She must remain positive.

She climbed onto her bed and almost immediately stood again. She wasn't going to stay in her room like a well-behaved child. While Lucien investigated the passage, she'd go to the village and ask more questions about Mary. She'd touch people and eavesdrop on their thoughts and memories if necessary.

Rosalind picked up her replacement hairbrush to tidy her hair, gripping it more tightly when a visible tremor shook her hand. Every day, she missed Mary's cheerful presence, the desolation like a heavy weight in the pit of her stomach. Today was even worse. Six years to the day, Mary had officially started tending to Rosalind's needs. No, she couldn't loll around doing nothing, not when the memories of past days spent together threatened to overwhelm her with grief.

They'd always cajoled her aunt's cook into giving them a special meal to eat at their favorite spot on the bank of a small stream. Despite Mary's dislike of the outdoors, most years they'd enjoyed Cook's cakes to celebrate the special day. Her eyes misted as she recalled the fun they'd had together. She couldn't just sit and do nothing, not today of all days. She refused.

Rosalind rang for a servant. “I’d like to go to the village,” she said when the maid arrived. “Please have Tickell summon a footman to escort me. I will require a pony and cart.”

The young maid curtseyed. “Yes, my lady.”

Almost two hours later, Matthew helped her into the cart and handed an irritated Rosalind her bag of medicines. The pony fidgeted, pawing the ground, eager to leave the confines of the stable. Rosalind felt the same impatience and prayed they’d depart before Lady Augusta decided to summon her again.

Once the footman swung up beside her and flicked the reins, the black pony took off at a fast trot. His pace barely slackened as they approached the avenue of trees after exiting the castle forecourt.

Rosalind seized her bag when it started to slide from the cart. She shoved it under her feet and gripped the edge of the cart until the color bled from her knuckles. “Do we need to go so fast?” she shouted above the creaking cart, the pounding of the pony’s hooves on the dusty road, and the footman’s curses.

“Whoa!” Matthew yelled, hauling back on the reins.

The cart shot into the avenue. Sunlight faded to dark, forbidding black. Branches whipped across her face and torso.

“What’s wrong?” Rosalind shrieked.

“Whoa! Whoa! I don’t know, my lady!” Matthew leaned back, pulling with all his strength.

“Turn the pony up the steep path, the one at the exit of the avenue,” she ordered.

“Aye. That should slow him.” Grimly, the footman sawed on the reins, trying to turn the pony’s head.

Rosalind feared they’d whisk past the turnoff, but at the last second the pony grudgingly turned. The cart hit a hole in the road. Rosalind screamed and slid against the footman. Her bag flew from her grasp, flying off the cart, hitting the ground with a thud.

“Hang on, my lady! The brute is slowing.”

As the slope increased, the pony reduced speed. When he finally halted, his coat was white with foamy sweat. His sleek sides heaved as he sucked for breath.

The footman leaped nimbly from the cart, holding the pony firmly to prevent flight. “Are you all right, my lady?”

“I’m fine.” With the footman’s help, Rosalind clambered from the cart.

The footman scratched his head. “I’ve never known old Sambo to take a start like that.”

“Check his harness,” Rosalind directed in a terse voice.

“Righto, my lady. I’ve heard of insects stinging animals. Do you think that could have happened?”

“I don’t know.” Rosalind limped back to where her bag lay on the ground. She opened it cautiously, expecting the worst. The pungent scent of dried herbs was strong. Her eyes watered. She wiped them impatiently and restored her medicines to order. Only two jars broken. It could have been worse.

“My lady.” The footman waved with excitement. “Come and see what I’ve discovered.”

Rosalind hurried to his side as fast as her throbbing knee allowed.

“Poor Sambo was stung. Look!” The footman peeled back the harness. Sambo danced uneasily, rolling his eyes and snorting. The footman held him steady.

Rosalind bit back a gasp as she saw several wasps trapped under the leather strap. Some of them were still alive. “No, don’t pick them up with your bare hand. They’ll sting. I have gloves. Let me.”

She brushed the insects away rather than picking them up. Some fell to the ground dead while others flew away once released. “Who harnessed up?”

“I don’t know, my lady, but I intend to find out. If this were a joke, it’s not funny. We could have been killed.”

The footman’s face echoed her anger. An accident was probably the desired outcome. They’d been lucky. She pushed aside her uneasiness for practical considerations. “Is Sambo all right?”

“I won’t hitch up the harness again, but we can manage right enough if I lead him. It’s not far to the village.”

“Thank you, Matthew.”

They arrived at the village fifteen minutes later without further mishap. The usual assortment of children, dogs and chickens greeted them on arrival. Matthew helped her down from the cart.

Billy shoved his way to the front of the crowd. “I’ll carry the lady’s bag.”

“Thank you, Billy. How is your brother?”

“He swore today,” Billy said.

Rosalind bit back a smile. “That must mean he’s on the mend.” Against all her predictions, the boy’s injuries had responded well to treatment. Billy’s brother was the perfect person to question.

The chickens and dogs soon lost interest in her arrival, but the children tagged along behind. One small girl with plaits and a missing front tooth tugged on her hand.

Rosalind slowed her steps to smile down at her. “Hello.”

“Are you the witch lady?” she asked.

Rosalind came to an abrupt halt. She gasped at the shooting pain in her knee but didn’t take her gaze off the girl. “Where did you hear that?”

“Of course she’s not a witch,” Billy declared.

“Who said I was a witch?” Rosalind asked icily, drawing herself upright.

A frightened look flashed across the girl’s face. She cowered as if she expected Rosalind to strike her. “I heard ladies talking.”

“When? Have you heard the same thing, Billy?”

He hesitated before nodding. “Aye. I’ve heard talk.”

“Today?”

“Are you going to burn?” the little girl whispered.

Rosalind flinched. “Who told you that?” She looked askance at Matthew.

He gave a clipped nod. “I’ve heard rumors too, my lady.”

“No, I’m not a witch. I’m the same as you.” Nonetheless, apprehension laced her forced smile. “Billy, let’s see how Harry is getting along.”

Rosalind and Billy left the small group of children to continue with skipping rope and their game of tag.

“Witches are evil,” Billy said without warning. “They keep frogs and cats for pets and ride a broomstick.”

Grim amusement fought with horror. Lucien had been right. The rumors were flying as fast as the fabled broomsticks. She considered the visits she’d made to the sick, the treatments she’d given, and the reactions of the people. She’d been so careful. She knew she had, especially after her experience in Stow-on-the-Wold. How had the rumors started? Who’d started them?

Billy led Rosalind inside the small cottage. Harry lay on a pallet in front of the fire. Smoke filled the single room, making her eyes water. Billy’s

mother stood at the fireside, stirring the contents of an iron cooking pot. On their entrance, her head jerked up. Her eyes widened and her spoon dropped from shaky fingers. Liquid splashed from the pot into the fire with a loud sizzle.

"Good day, Mrs. Green," Rosalind said, smiling despite the other woman's reaction.

"Billy, where have you been?"

"With my friends." He cast a quick look at Rosalind. "Lady Hastings has come to see Harry."

Mrs. Green glanced at Harry. Her face softened for an instant but the tenderness had disappeared by the time she gave her attention to Rosalind. Her expression and the whispered chant under her breath indicated she'd heard the rumors and believed them.

Rosalind held the woman's gaze, refusing to show guilt or uneasiness in any form. She wished Mary were here. Her friend would stick up for her and give the woman the sharp end of her tongue for even thinking about witches and black magic. Sorrow pierced her then—a gloomy foreboding. Swallowing rapidly, she forced aside the lump of terror blocking her throat. "Is now a good time for me to look at Harry's wound?"

Mrs. Green hesitated. "Since yer here," she said finally. "I have to go. Billy, show the lady out when she's ready to leave."

Billy nodded, and Mrs. Green hastened from the cottage, her lips moving in silent voice. The woman was probably murmuring all sorts of superstitious chants under her breath so Rosalind didn't do anything to her precious son. It was obvious Harry was the favorite.

Rosalind smiled at Billy. "Why don't you go back and play with your friends? Harry and I will be fine." Best if Billy didn't witness her interrogation of his brother.

"No," Harry croaked. "Don't go."

The boy hadn't uttered a word the whole time, but Rosalind was aware of Harry's wide, anxious eyes. He'd heard the rumors of witchcraft too.

"Billy," Rosalind said.

After another stern look, Billy left. Rosalind tugged back the blanket covering Harry's skinny chest. The boy's hands trembled. She smiled, hoping to reassure him. "Let's see how your leg is coming along. Have you tried walking?"

Biting his lip, he shook his head.

“You didn’t tell me how you were shot. Did Hawk shoot you?” She knew he hadn’t because she’d read him earlier in his delirious state, but she hoped he’d offer her more information.

“I don’t know no Hawk.”

His chest tensed under Rosalind’s touch and his breathing hitched. He lied.

“You know Hawk,” she murmured. “He’s the man who runs the smuggling ring. The men of St. Clare work for him. Did he shoot you?”

“No.” Harry’s reply was whisper soft as if he didn’t want to answer but couldn’t help it.

Rosalind decided to push harder before Mrs. Green returned. “Tell me about Hawk.”

Harry’s gasp was loud. “He’ll kill me.”

“He won’t know because I won’t tell. What does he look like?”

“I don’t know.”

“Tell me.” Rosalind placed her hands on Harry’s leg. The vision poured over her. The boy mightn’t tell her, but when she asked questions, he thought of Hawk. A moment’s sympathy stirred before she forced it away. She needed answers. Hawk was dangerous—to both her and Lucien.

“Is he big? Small? What color hair does he have?”

Harry groaned, trying to move away, but the fever from his leg had left him weak. Even though she felt like a bully, she maintained a firm grip.

“I don’t know what he looks like.”

“How do you know the man is Hawk?”

“He wears a mask.”

A mask? Her mind probed Harry’s thoughts. She saw a tall figure dressed in black, a cape swirling about him in the wind. Rosalind sought his face. Dark hair. Long, tied back with a black ribbon. Frustration made her want to weep. Harry wasn’t lying to her. Hawk wore a mask. He had no idea of the identity of the man under that mask.

A shadow moved in the far corner of the room. Rosalind gasped in fright, her hand jerking off Harry’s leg.

The shadow separated from the wall. “Rosalind, what are you doing?”

“Lucien. What…what are you doing here?”

His eyes flashed impatience. “My question, I think.”

“I’m treating Harry’s leg.” Bother, she hadn’t had a chance to question the boy about Mary, but she’d wanted to ask about Hawk before someone

like her husband arrived.

“That’s not what it sounded like to me.” Lucien’s voice held sharp disbelief.

“Then why are you asking?” Rosalind snapped.

“So you could do a good job of incriminating yourself. Have you finished here?”

Rosalind folded her arms and gave a small mutinous huff. She tugged the blanket back over Harry’s leg. “You need to start walking about to regain your strength.”

Harry stared at them with huge frightened eyes.

Lucien took her arm, his grip firm. “Come, Rosalind.”

“I have other people to see.”

“Are they sick or are you going to interrogate them?”

Rosalind sniffed and didn’t bother replying. Drat the man. It was almost as if he could read her mind. She darted a look in his direction and discarded any idea of evading him. “I’m treating the ill,” she said, her tone lofty. “I have a footman escorting me just as you instructed, so you don’t need to wait.”

Lucien bit back a grin, once again wondering why he’d dismissed his wife as a boring brown mouse. She had more determination than most men. But he knew she wasn’t going to treat the sick. The angle of her chin gave her away. She planned to question more of the villagers about Hawk.

He leaned close to whisper in her ear. “I’ve talked to Matthew already. I know you were the subject of another suspicious accident.”

“But—”

“We will discuss this at the castle.” After a nod at Harry, Lucien propelled his wife from the small cottage. “I sent Matthew back to the castle,” he said, taking her medicine bag from her.

Rosalind stopped. An indignant frown creased her brow. “How am I meant to get back?”

“I will take you.” Lucien led her to the stables. Oberon whickered softly in greeting. He stood back to let Rosalind enter first.

“I’m not getting on that brute.” Rosalind backed up rapidly until she collided with Lucien’s chest.

“Yet I found you hiding in Oberon’s stall the other day.”

“That was…” she trailed off, caught in half-truths.

“You lied to me, perchance?”

“I—”

“Come, Rosalind. There’s nothing to be frightened of.”

“Have you checked under the saddle?” she asked, still stalling.

“I intend to do it right now.” Lucien led Oberon from the stall and deftly undid the girth. He checked beneath the saddle and saddle blanket and refastened the girth again. After examining the reins and bridle, he tossed his wife up on the saddle and handed her medicine bag to her. Lucien swung up behind her and wrapped one arm around her waist.

“I’ll fall,” she gasped, wriggling about uncomfortably.

“I won’t let you fall.” Lucien pulled her slight body close and used his knees to urge Oberon into a walk. Rosalind trembled, and he felt a moment’s misgiving. He still had bad news to impart.

“What if Lady Augusta sees me sitting on the horse like this? It’s… unseemly.”

He tightened his hold, drawing her close so she was almost sitting on his lap, and signaled Oberon to increase his pace. “Close your eyes,” he murmured, looking down at her pale face. When her eyes snapped shut, he smiled.

The scent of flowers rose from her hair and suddenly he wished they weren’t atop his horse. The need to kiss her lips was an ache in his soul. It wasn’t because he’d forgotten Francesca or that he no longer loved his first wife. She resided in his heart still, but to his surprise, he’d found there was room for Rosalind too.

The trip back to the castle didn’t take long enough. In the courtyard, Lucien reluctantly released his wife. A stable lad appeared, and he gave Oberon into his care.

Rosalind was still limping so Lucien swept her into his arms, bag and all, and hustled up the flight of stairs.

“I can walk,” she protested.

His wife was predictable when it came to independence. “If I waited for you, I’d miss my next meal.”

Rosalind huffed indignantly, but Lucien could tell she wanted to laugh. He strode through the entranceway into the Great Hall. It was warmer inside and a welcome respite from the stiff breeze outside. A maid bustled about with a tray of drinks at the far end of the hall. His cousin Charles stood with Mansfield, Lady Sophia and two young women. They looked familiar but Lucien couldn’t recall their names.

“Hello.” Charles’s greeting held a note of surprise.

“Hastings. Lady Hastings,” Mansfield said. His languid gaze swept over Rosalind. “Anything wrong?”

“We’ve been to the village,” Lucien said. Instinct told him not to talk to his cousin and friend about Rosalind’s activities in the village. Rosalind wriggled, and he reluctantly let her down but kept a steadying hand on her arm.

“Are you hurt, Lady Hastings?” Lady Sophia asked.

Lucien frowned at her honey-sweet tones. He’d already noticed the three young women whispering amongst themselves while he spoke to Charles and Mansfield. Not one of them could bear to gaze upon his face.

“A twinge in my knee,” Rosalind said.

“Did you fall?” Lady Sophia’s face held concern yet Lucien sensed the girl didn’t feel the slightest hint of sympathy. “Your gown is grubby.”

Rosalind’s lips firmed, and Lucien noted her chin lifted in defiance. She opened her mouth, but he spoke first.

“We intend to retire to our chambers to rest until the evening meal.”

“We’re going for a stroll in the garden. It’s sheltered from the wind. Are you sure we can’t tempt you to join us?” one of the young women said, her mouth stretching into a moue of disappointment.

“It’s more fun with lots of people,” Lady Sophia said. “Are you sure you won’t come, Hastings? Lady Hastings could rest so she is refreshed for tonight.”

Lucien decided it was time he put Lady Sophia in her place. Since the first, she’d made veiled comments about Rosalind. He hadn’t stuck up for his wife then, but he could do the right thing now. Rosalind was lady of the castle and, as such, had his full support.

“We will see you later.” Lucien scooped Rosalind off her feet with a suddenness that made her squeak. He chuckled as he strode away with her tightly held in his arms, despite her muffled protests. “I have bad news,” he murmured.

Foreboding struck her face, and she ceased her struggles immediately. “Mary?”

The faint tremor in her voice brought all his protective tendencies to the surface. He wished he didn’t have to tell her the grim truth but knew she’d settle for nothing less. “I’m afraid so. Wait until we reach my chamber. I’ll

tell you everything then. We don’t know who might eavesdrop on our conversation.”

At his chamber door, Lucien used his shoulder to nudge it open. He deposited Rosalind on his bed and instantly, his arms felt empty. An uncomfortable thought lodged in his mind—he was becoming used to seeing her in his bed.

“Tell me about Mary.” Rosalind’s eyes glittered with stark, vivid fear, and it tore at Lucien’s heart. He wanted to lie, to tell Rosalind her fears were premature, but he couldn’t leave her with hope Mary would return when there was none.

“She’s dead,” he said, his bluntness making him wince.

“How do you know? Are you sure it was Mary?” Tears throbbed in her voice and glittered in her pale blue eyes. Her hands fisted in her lap, and she looked like a broken doll. “It’s exactly six years since…since Mary started work…looking after me.”

Lucien was unsure of whether to make an offer to comfort her or not. “I’m sorry,” he murmured, feeling inadequate and useless. More questions would come and he’d have to tell her the worst.

One tear overflowed and poured down her cheek. “Tell me everything.”

He sat on the bed beside her, pausing to marshal his thoughts. “I found Mary’s body near the North Tower.”

Rosalind grabbed him by the shoulders, startling Lucien with her strength and intensity. “Someone killed her?”

“I’m sorry.” He shrugged, feeling her pain but unable to do anything to make it stop. “I’ve organized two of the footmen to take her body to the housekeeper.”

“Are you sure it’s Mary?” Hope lurked in her eyes when she looked at him. Another tear overflowed, and the anguish on her face almost broke his heart.

“Yes.” Lucien reached for Rosalind’s hand. “She had a head injury and stab wounds in her chest. I’m sorry.”

“I miss her so much.” She shuffled closer to him then, as if she wasn’t certain he’d welcome her touch. Swallowing the constriction in his throat, he gathered her in his arms, holding her tight as her body shook with her grief.

“We’ll discover who did this,” he promised. “They will pay.”

***

Early the next morning, Rosalind slipped from the castle and followed the path leading to the garden. *Mary's dead.* She still couldn't believe it. With a heavy heart, she paid scant attention to her surroundings, aside from pulling her mantle close to ward off the morning chill. She lifted Noir from her pocket and set the kitten on the ground. He stalked a shadow, springing and landing in the midst of a small leafy plant. Dew sprayed in all directions, and Noir looked so comically startled Rosalind laughed out loud before stopping guiltily when she remembered Mary. The kitten sneezed, stuck his nose in the air and stalked ahead, looking wet and bedraggled.

Lucien had promised her they'd bury Mary in the plot on the grounds of Castle St. Clare. And he'd meant every word. Although he scowled often and his second nature was bossiness, he had a kind heart. Exactly the qualifications she required in the father of her children.

Rosalind's hand slipped down to slide over her belly. How would it feel to carry Lucien's child? Would she ever know?

A gunshot sounded in the distance. She froze like a fox scenting a hound. Another shot echoed. Rosalind let out a sigh of relief. The shots were on the other side of the castle. The men had discussed a hunting trip last night.

She continued her walk, but paid more attention to her surroundings. A light mist was blowing in from the sea. Damp but still sparse, the mist let Rosalind see most of the garden, but obscured the sea. She heard the distant roar of the waves as they struck the cliff base, and a thrush singing near the hedgerow.

More rifle fire sounded, closer this time. Rosalind frowned. She knew too well how dangerous it was to walk in an area where the men were hunting.

She looked for her kitten. "Noir!" He'd been there a second ago. Sighing, she commenced a search. He wasn't hiding behind the lavender bush or the unruly box hedge. "Noir, you little wretch. Where are you?" From the corner of her eye she saw a flash of black. Rosalind whirled about, snatching at the kitten before he disappeared again.

"Steady on there, Lady Hastings. I don't think Hastings would like you grabbing my legs," Mansfield said drolly.

“Oh!” The air hissed from her lungs and hot color flooded her face. She froze in her kneeling position. “I’m so sorry…I didn’t mean…Oh!”

A second chuckle joined Mansfield’s laughter at her expense.

“Charles!” Rosalind said. The heat in her face intensified. “I brought my kitten out to the garden and he’s disappeared. I only took my eyes off him for a second. When I saw the flash of color, I grabbed before I thought. I’m so sorry.”

“No harm done,” Charles said. “Mansfield probably enjoyed the attention.”

“Of course I did.” Mansfield’s lips tipped upward in a grin.

Rosalind straightened to see that both men carried rifles over their shoulders. “I heard gunshots. Have you been hunting?”

Mansfield nodded. “We have.”

“No luck though, as you can probably tell. Cook had her heart set on rabbit pie for dinner,” Charles said.

“Is your kitten black, my lady?” Mansfield asked.

“Can you see him?” She squeezed her hands together, worry churning her stomach as she scanned the bushes. Although she wanted to find her kitten, she didn’t want either of the men to observe Noir too closely.

“There he is!” Mansfield moved with a speed that belied his size. “Got you.” He held the wriggling kitten in one hand, and Rosalind hurried to take charge of her pet. Mansfield handed the kitten over without comment.

“Thank you,” she murmured and thrust Noir safely in her pocket.

“You and Hastings seem to be on much better terms,” Charles said.

Rosalind’s head jerked up while inside she hugged the warmth from the acknowledgement close to her heart. It wasn’t just her imagination.

Mansfield smirked. “It’s true. I never thought I’d see Hastings smile again let alone at a woman. He’s not been the same since he arrived back at St. Clare.”

“It will be good to see children at the castle again,” Charles said. “We had fun when we were youngsters. Do you remember, Mansfield? The fishing. The hunting. Searching for the treasure and playing hide-and-seek.”

“Stealing pies when Cook wasn’t looking.” Mansfield’s grin widened with the memories. He studied Rosalind closely. “You’re good for Hastings.”

Charles nodded. “We await the announcement with pleasure. It will take the pressure off us, won’t it, Mansfield?”

“You, maybe,” Mansfield growled. “But my mother is constantly harping at me to tie the knot with some female.”

“Sounds like Aunt Augusta,” Charles said. “The sooner you and Lucien have children, the better.”

“I think we’re embarrassing her,” Mansfield observed.

They certainly were. “It’s not a seemly conversation.” The two men were talking about her as if she were a broodmare. Rosalind wasn’t sure where to look. In the end, she concentrated on a lavender bush a few feet away. It was a pity she hadn’t perfected her aunt’s technique of silencing unwanted comments.

“We’re not sorry, Rosalind,” Charles said, smiling. “We’re family. You have to put up with us.” He paused to chuckle wickedly. “It’s good not being the one in the firing line. Besides, it would be good to have children about the place.”

Chapter Fifteen

Three nights later Rosalind smoothed the apple-green skirts of her newest gown, delivered from the local dressmaker. Mary would've loved this gown because she had a fondness for apples and apple pie. The memory of her recent loss sent an icy chill skittering across her skin. Her friend was at rest now, even though her murderer went unpunished.

Rosalind's shoulders slumped, and she gulped hard. Lucien had stood at her side in the graveyard, clasping her hand and offering silent sympathy. A flash of loneliness gripped her. Lucien and the others had offered their commiserations, but how could they understand? Mary hadn't judged her because of her differences. A true companion, she'd accepted her as a friend and championed her in times of need.

A clock chimed, jerking Rosalind back to the present. She made her way to the stairs that led to the floor below. St. Bridget's nose, she hoped this dinner would run smoothly, since Lady Sophia was in attendance. Rosalind had a sneaking suspicion Lady Augusta was matchmaking with Charles and Lady Sophia in her sights—an absurd notion on Lady Augusta's part. The two barely spoke to each other because the girl spent more time ingratiating herself with Lucien. Jealousy speared Rosalind's heart. Soon she'd take firm action to show Lady Sophia that Lucien was *her* husband and, as such, his loyalties belonged elsewhere.

As Rosalind approached the staircase, a muffled thud claimed her attention. She half turned, expecting to see one of the servants, but saw no one. Shaking her head, she laughed deprecatingly. Every single noise made her jump these days, which was silly considering the age of the castle and the way the timbered additions constantly creaked. Not wanting to draw Lady Augusta's censure for tardiness, she hastened her pace, stepping down onto the first step. Her foot caught on something, throwing her off balance. She toppled backward. Her hands clutched for the banister and missed. A scream sounded.

Hers.

Rosalind hit the stairs with a thud. Again, she grabbed for the railing. Again, she missed, grasping at air instead. She landed with a painful thump, rolled and snatched desperately. The solid wood beneath her hands wrenched free a moan of relief.

She grabbed the banister with every shred of strength and came to an arm-jarring halt. Her chest heaved, her breaths escaping in raw pants of relief. When her breathing finally evened out, she flexed her leg. Pain darted from her ankle. She shifted her weight gingerly until at last she sat safely on a stair. Only then did she ease her grip on the banister and look up to see what she'd tripped over. A dark man-size shadow flickered along the pale wall beneath the candle sconce before jerking from sight, a whisper of a foreign sound accompanying the strange spectacle. A blur of black darted down the landing, pouncing on something out of her vision. Someone hissed, and a sharp feline mew of pain jolted her to action. Noir? Seconds later, her kitten raced into view and scuttled down the stairs to crawl onto her lap.

The sound of running feet thudded on the landing above. Her dress had hiked up, displaying her lacy garters and her stocking from knee to ankle. She hurriedly lifted her kitten to rearrange her skirts. Her gaze caught on a small rent where she'd caught the hem with her shoe. Tears filled her eyes as she stared down at her throbbing ankle. One seeped free and ran down her cheek. She sniffed and brushed it away with her free hand.

"Rosalind!" Charles's anxious face stared down at her. Mansfield appeared then, as did her husband.

Lucien rushed down the stairs, stopping to crouch beside her. "Rosalind, I heard a scream. What happened? Are you all right?"

Another tear slid free.

"What is it? Where does it hurt?"

A sob escaped. Rosalind's vision turned blurry.

"Talk to me, Rosalind." Lucien sat on the stair beside her and placed an arm around her shoulders.

"My dress," she managed. Her shoulders heaved. Another sob escaped.

"What about your dress?"

"It's…ru-ruined," she wailed. With that, she burrowed her face in his chest and cried in earnest.

Lucien set an indignant Noir aside and cradled her gently in his arms. He murmured soft nonsensical words until she quieted. She was dimly

aware of Charles and Mansfield's worried queries. Lucien spoke to them and the two friends left, heading down the flight of sweeping stairs, leaving her alone with Lucien.

Rosalind swallowed and pulled away. She wiped a self-conscious hand over her face, knowing she probably looked terrible with red eyes and an equally red nose.

Lucien studied her for long seconds. He lifted one hand to wipe away tears on her cheek. "What is really wrong? Did you fall?"

"I tripped."

"Over this rascal?" He scooped up Noir, regarding him with a stern face.

"No. No, it wasn't Noir. It was a string of some sort tied across the stairs at ankle level. I didn't see it and stumbled." She waited for him to tell her it was imagination, but he remained thoughtful. She shuddered inwardly. If it hadn't been for the curve in the stairs, she would have toppled all the way to the bottom.

"Did you see anyone?"

"All I saw was a shadow, and I think Noir pounced at them, whoever it was. It happened so quickly. It could have been one of the servants or one of the guests." She held her breath, waiting for his next comment. He hadn't believed her earlier, but another incident might make him finally accept that someone was going out of their way to injure her or worse.

"That makes three incidents in a week," he said at last.

"Don't forget the men shooting at me." The memory made her recall Mary, and she struggled against the onset of more tears. "You don't think it's my imagination?"

"No." Lucien stood. "Can you walk? Wait. Don't try on the stairs. I'll carry you." After handing her the kitten, he picked her up and strode back up the stairs with a firm tread.

Rosalind stiffened. "Where are we going?"

"To your chamber. You're injured so Aunt Augusta can pardon you from dinner for once."

"I'm fine," she protested. "I need to tidy my appearance and change my dress, that's all."

"You can't even walk. How are you going to manage the stairs?"

"I haven't tried to walk yet." Rosalind paused to bat her eyelids at her husband. "Besides, I thought you'd carry me."

The sound of Lucien's uninhibited laughter was a gift to treasure. "Minx."

Rosalind turned pensive. "There's another reason. I want to see if any of the guests seem surprised by my appearance."

"I don't like it," Lucien said.

"But you'll be there to watch. What more can happen to me?"

***

Rosalind gritted her teeth and managed a smile for the maid who handed her a dish of tea. *Boredom.* That's what could happen next. Apart from the minister's wife, the women were ignoring her. During dinner, the snubs were not so obvious, but now that the women had left the men to their port and pipe smoking, Rosalind sat on the horsehair couch, along with the minister's wife, in solitary splendor.

"I so enjoy needlework," Mrs. Wright said brightly.

Rosalind smiled encouragingly when the woman faltered. "What do you stitch?"

"I am working on new cushions for the front parlor. I designed the patterns myself." The woman glanced across the room at the chattering women. She bit her lip, and her hands twisted in her lap.

"I wish I were talented with a needle and thread." Rosalind felt bad for the woman whose only crime was to sit with her. Perhaps the other ladies feared a contagion of witchcraft. If only they knew. The only thing they might catch from her was clumsiness, for she was a walking disaster according to Lady Augusta.

"I know the rumors aren't true." Mrs. Wright glanced at Rosalind and looked away, a soft blush highlighting her embarrassment.

"What rumors?" Rosalind asked, but she already suspected what Mrs. Wright referred to.

"About you being a witch." The woman's gaze shot to her embroidered shoes. "I know it's a falsehood. You do so much for the sick in St. Clare. And I've never heard of you selling love charms and spells." The woman spoke quickly, as if she had to get the words out before an interruption.

"Spells!" Rosalind almost choked on her tea. She coughed and hurriedly set her cup on the oak pedestal table at her elbow.

“I’m so sorry. I don’t wish to distress you!” Mrs. Wright looked as though she might burst into tears, and her raised voice had attracted the attention of the other women.

Rosalind’s lips firmed when she saw Lady Sophia and her bosom friends, Lady Margaret and Lady Suzanna, put their heads together to whisper behind their fans. Their malicious eyes settled on her. Lady Augusta’s perceptive gaze searched the women’s faces. Her brow knitted, then settled into complacency.

“No, not the harpsichord,” Rosalind said.

“Mrs. Radcliffe, would you like to entertain us with some music? And perhaps Lady Suzanna will sing?”

Rosalind breathed again until she saw Lady Augusta’s attention fixed firmly on her. Her lined face had returned to a frown. A sigh escaped as Rosalind wondered what sin she’d committed this time.

“Lady Hastings, there you are. What are you doing all the way over here?” Lady Sophia trilled. She glided toward Rosalind like a ship under full sail. Her silk sack dress was full, with a snug bodice highlighting her creamy skin and other charms.

Rosalind whispered one of the coachman’s curses about St. Christopher’s body parts under her breath. A discussion with Lady Sophia was exactly what she needed at this time. Her ankle and knee throbbed with a persistent demand for attention while her head ached in sympathy.

Lady Margaret simpered. “Do you not want to join us?”

“We wished for quiet conversation,” Mrs. Wright said.

One pointed look from Lady Sophia and the minister’s wife withered like a plucked flower left out in the full sun. Rosalind half expected her to flee, but Mrs. Wright stood her ground, resisting her transparent urge to scamper.

“Is there something I can help you with?” Rosalind stood, not liking the sly exchange of looks passing between the two friends.

“I’ve heard rumors in the village.” Lady Sophia tossed her head, making powdered ringlets bounce against her creamy shoulders.

“You listen to rumors?” Rosalind’s soft laugh drew a frown from Lady Sophia and, thankfully, gave no indication of her inner tension.

“They are more than rumors,” Lady Sophia snapped.

Rosalind’s heart slammed against her ribs, but her smile remained intact. Lucien had warned her, the village children had questioned her, so it

was easy to guess the delightful tidbit Lady Sophia wished to share.

Witchcraft.

“Do tell,” Rosalind said in a playful tone, ignoring the panic cramping her stomach. If she belittled Lady Sophia’s words and treated them as nonsense, perhaps they’d cause less damage. Even so, she felt her secure future slipping from her grasp. It was happening again. Soon, people would turn their backs when they saw her coming. Only her station would save her, but she’d become a prisoner, unable to leave the castle. In outlying villages, they still burned witches at the stake, even though authorities frowned on the practice.

“I want a love spell.” Lady Sophia met and held Rosalind’s gaze, daring her to deny the demand.

Lady Margaret gasped while a soft moan came from Mrs. Wright. Rosalind ignored them both.

“Lady Margaret would like one too.”

This time soft color flooded Lady Margaret’s face, but she didn’t gainsay Lady Sophia’s demands on her behalf.

Mrs. Wright drew in a shocked breath. “The rumors are wicked. Wicked, scurrilous gossip.”

“I have no idea how to make a love spell.” Rosalind laughed. “Wherever did you get the idea?”

“You’re a witch. Everyone knows witches sell love charms along with dark spells. The cows on Mansfield’s estate have gone dry.” She thrust a finger at Rosalind in dramatic statement. “Are you responsible?”

Rosalind rolled her eyes just as the music of the harpsichord came to a crashing halt. She picked up her fan and opened it with a snap.

“What’s going on?” Lady Augusta’s strident tones snapped across the parlor.

Rosalind knew she must face the charge without a flinch. She might not be able to stop the gossip in the village, but she could halt it here. “Lady Sophia was kind enough to repeat some unpleasant gossip doing the rounds in the village.”

“Yes.” Mrs. Wright stepped up beside Rosalind. “I’ve never heard so much nonsense in all my life. How could anyone think Lady Hastings is a witch? She’s an angel. Only yesterday my husband commented on how good she is in treating the sick in the village.”

“Have those silly rumors about witchcraft surfaced again?” Lady Augusta demanded. “Stuff and nonsense! I expected better of you all. Lady Sophia, will you honor us with a rendition on the harpsichord? I’d like you to play a lullaby, if you please.”

Lady Sophia’s scowl and flashing eyes suggested Rosalind hadn’t heard the end of the matter. She swept away in a swish of skirts to seat herself at the harpsichord.

Rosalind sat to take the weight off her aching ankle and knee and plied her fan vigorously. Maybe she could fan away her apprehension. “Thank you for your defense, Mrs. Wright.”

“Call me Katherine. Please.” Katherine arranged her skirts so they wouldn’t crease. “Lady Sophia is spreading wicked gossip. I grew up in a village called Little Neston in Cheshire. When I was ten, one of the old women in the village was accused of witchcraft.” Katherine’s voice trembled. “I heard my parents talking. She wasn’t a witch. She was eccentric, but we all have our quirks. Stephen says we must accept each other’s shortcomings.”

Rosalind nodded, smiling inwardly at Katherine’s speech. The minister’s wife never said much, but it was obvious she felt strongly on this matter.

The door of the parlor opened and the gentlemen drifted inside.

“Rosalind, how are you feeling?”

“I am fine, Mansfield, thank you.” She set her fan on her lap.

Charles sauntered up to them, holding his quizzing glass high. “Devilish clumsy, aren’t you?”

“And you’re no gentleman, commenting on the fact.” Rosalind folded her fan with a flick of her wrist and stood.

“Are you going to sulk?” Interest colored Mansfield’s voice.

“No, I’m not! The two of you are impossible.”

“Just like my brothers,” Katherine said. “Always teasing.”

Rosalind turned to Katherine, surprised she was actually contributing to the conversation. “I’m an only child. I grew up with my cousin Miranda. I’ve no experience with brothers.”

“Lucky you didn’t grow up with us around,” Charles said with a grin. “We would have dared you to climb trees and crawl through dark passages. You’re so clumsy, we’d have been forever rescuing you.”

There was a moment’s startled silence, then the four of them laughed aloud.

“What’s the joke?” Lucien asked, coming up beside Rosalind.

The casual slide of his arm around her waist caused a hitch in her breath. She breathed carefully, savoring his closeness. “They’re laughing at my expense,” she said, shaking her head in mock sadness.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Katherine tense at Lucien’s appearance. Her gaze held both fascinated horror and pity. If Lucien saw, he gave no indication, but Rosalind felt irritation. It was a scar, that was all. He wasn’t a monster or a freak for people to pity. He was her husband. She rested her gloved hand on his arm to align her loyalties.

“Is your knee paining you? Your ankle?”

His warm, moist breath blew against her cheek, drawing a sweet shudder. In truth, her knee and ankle were both throbbing and, since the hour grew late, Rosalind had no compunction in retiring before the guests called for their carriages to leave. “I am a trifle sore.” The moment she uttered the words, the aches intensified. “Nothing some salve and rest won’t cure.”

“Come, say your good-nights, and I’ll escort you to your chamber.”

“Good night, Katherine. Thank you for keeping me company. Mansfield. Charles. No doubt I will see you on the morrow.”

After further farewells, Lucien and Rosalind left the parlor and made their way through the Long Gallery. At the base of the stairs, Lucien paused. “Would you like me to carry you?”

“I’ll manage.”

Lucien took one look at her pinched face and lifted her into his arms. She felt so tiny cradled next to his chest, a sensation he’d become used to recently. His English mouse possessed strength of character that made the rest of the women in the parlor look ordinary. And it was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore her charms.

He paused outside Rosalind’s chamber to open the door. A sound coming from inside the room made him halt.

Rosalind tugged his sleeve in a silent demand for him to put her down. Lucien frowned and indicated with a hand gesture for her to stay outside. He moved silently into the chamber. A whisper of silk behind him made his teeth clench.

Rosalind sidled up to him and tugged on his sleeve once more. “Who is it?” Her blue eyes flashed excitement, and Lucien groaned inwardly.

“Stay there,” he mouthed.

A flurry of movement coming from Rosalind’s dressing room made her leap into action.

“If someone is destroying my clothes again I’m going to scream.” She limped past Lucien, evading his grasp and shot into the dressing room.

“Damn.” Lucien hurried after her to avert further injury.

Rosalind slammed to a halt. “What on earth do you think you are doing?” Her severe voice sounded surprisingly like Lady Augusta at her most imperious. Her eyes narrowed a second before she darted from sight, then a feminine screech rent the air, loud enough to make his ears ring.

“What’s going on here?” Lucien burst through the doorway in time to see Rosalind grab the dark-haired maid by the shoulders, the one who was always dropping sly hints about joining him in his bed, and shake her vigorously.

“I asked you a question,” Rosalind snapped.

Beth glared at Rosalind, her mouth firmed in a stubborn line of mutiny.

“Tell me.” Rosalind shook the maid again.

“I came to turn down your bed and light the candles,” Beth said. “Ask Tickell. He sent me.”

“He told Maria to do it,” Rosalind countered, releasing her.

“No, he…How did you know?” The maid edged away.

“I just do.” Rosalind folded her arms and glared down her upturned nose, her chin jutting upward in a pugnacious manner.

Lucien bit back a smile. Rosalind was handling this interview well without his help. And she was right to question the maid. Several gowns lay on the floor in a puddle of silk, and the maid was still grasping a lacy shawl in her right hand.

“Would you like to hand over the knife from your pocket?” Rosalind’s tone was as pleasant as if she were breaking a fast with acquaintances.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Rosalind pointed. “The knife in your pocket.”

The maid’s shoulders slumped. She yanked the knife from her pocket, and Lucien stood poised, ready to intercede should she threaten Rosalind.

“They’re right,” Beth said with a snarl. “You are a witch.”

Lucien took two steps forward, but Rosalind stilled him with a look.

She grabbed the maid's forearm. "Who says I'm a witch? Who's spouting such falsehoods?"

Beth tried to ease from Rosalind's grip. "I have more rooms to ready for the guests. Tickell said I have to finish them by midnight."

"You're going to clean up the mess here first," Rosalind said. "But before you do that, you're going to tell me who suggested you destroy my gowns. I presume it was you who ransacked my room last week. You must have laughed when I asked you to help me clean up the mess. How much did Lady Sophia pay you?"

The maid gasped. The color fled her cheeks, leaving her pasty white.

Lucien leaned against the doorframe and waited. He hoped Rosalind knew what she was doing, because when she blurted out things like that without warning, damned if she didn't sound like a witch.

Beth refused to meet Rosalind's gaze. She mumbled under her breath and this time Lucien heard Rosalind gasp.

"You were responsible for me falling down the stairs tonight. Why?"

"I was not!"

But one look at the maid's face told Lucien she was guilty. She *had* caused Rosalind's fall.

Lucien closed the distance between himself and the two women. Fury whipped him at the idea of losing Rosalind. Francesca's death had been bad enough, but to lose another wife was unthinkable. "You could have killed Lady Hastings."

"I think that was the idea," Rosalind said. A look passed between them requiring no words.

"Don't joke." Lucien turned a glare on the hapless maid. "Why?"

Beth tossed her head and tried to tug free of Rosalind. "Let me go. I haven't done anything."

Rosalind's mouth firmed. Lucien watched her tense then relax. She loosened her grip on the maid. "Go," she said. "I'll deal with you in the morning."

About to protest, Lucien snapped his mouth shut when he saw the warning Rosalind sent him.

Freed, the maid shot past them. Her hurried footsteps resounded as she raced across the room. The door creaked and slammed, indicating her exit.

Lucien stepped from the cramped dressing room into the more spacious chamber. "Do you think she was acting on her own or is someone paying

her to cause mischief?"

"Lady Sophia paid her." Rosalind settled onto a wooden chair with a relieved sigh. She rubbed at her knee through her skirts and winced. "I feel as if I've been used for target practice. I think my bruises have bruises. I'll talk to Lady Sophia in the morning. She won't get away with this."

Lucien frowned. "She didn't admit that Lady Sophia paid her. Why are you so sure Lady Sophia is responsible?"

Rosalind's eyes flashed. "Because I read the maid's thoughts. Lady Sophia is responsible."

"You read her mind?" Lucien seized Rosalind's words and threw them back at her in clear disbelief.

Rosalind's glance contained a mixture of guilt and frustration, tinged with something that looked like hope.

She read the maid's mind? How was that possible? He laughed and heard uneasiness in the sound, the shock and disbelief. "You're joking, aren't you?"

"No," Rosalind said, holding his gaze and maintaining it with a steady look. "I have…a gift. Sometimes I'm able to read minds. My grandmother had the same gift."

Lucien felt an urgent need to move, so he walked to the door and returned. "How does this gift work?"

"You don't believe me."

"I…it seems unusual." He wasn't sure he liked the idea of her eavesdropping on his thoughts. She'd said she could only read people sometimes. Hope surged and withered at her look of sympathy. "You can read my mind."

"Mostly."

Lucien stiffened. "So you know of my past." Her knowledge of his inner thoughts seemed obtrusive.

She met his gaze fearlessly. "Yes."

He compressed his mouth. "Good night, Rosalind." He strode to the door connecting their chambers and jerked it open. It was only with the greatest willpower that he didn't slam the door shut. God forbid, he wanted to. He paced the length of his chamber, ignoring the luxurious surroundings and the softness of the Persian rug beneath his shoes.

What the hell was he going to do?

The door burst open before he could even begin to think.

“Don’t walk away like that.” Rosalind limped into his chamber, her blue eyes blazing fire.

The door slammed behind her, and Lucien suppressed a flash of dark humor. He’d restrained his temper while she hadn’t even tried.

“How would you feel if I knew your every thought and not one single thing was private? You’d hate it,” Lucien answered his own question.

Rosalind’s chin jerked upward. “I don’t know your every thought.”

“That’s not what you said before.”

“I said I knew your thoughts, but only if I’m touching you. I don’t know what you’re thinking now.” She planted her hands on her hips. “Although I could take a guess. Do you think I enjoy knowing what the maid thinks, what Lady Augusta thinks? All my life this *gift* has set me apart. Do you think I want to be different from everyone else? Do you think I want people to look at me and call me witch? Why do you think I wear gloves most of the time?” She paused, her chest heaving with indignation. “The only reason I’m trying to read people now is so I can discover who killed Mary and who’s trying to hurt us.”

Lucien stiffened. *Us.* “Don’t,” he snarled. “It’s too dangerous.” The idea of taking responsibility for another death appalled him.

She approached him and stopped an arm’s length away, so close he smelled flowers on her skin and hair. “Do you think the accidents have something to do with Francesca’s death?” She stepped even closer until a mere hand span separated them.

Hearing Francesca’s name on Rosalind’s lips shocked him. Pain, sharp and jagged, wrenched his heart, and the ring of truth made him draw a sharp breath. It was obvious she was using her gift, trying to help him locate Francesca’s murderer, even though it put her in danger. The selfless act battered down the last flimsy defenses he’d erected between them.

“Hell, Rosalind.” His voice broke on her name. He closed the remaining distance between them, wrapping his arms around her body and drawing her to his chest. He smoothed his hand over her hair and noticed it trembled. He moved it again, smoothing and petting, savoring the softness of her. It was a long time since someone had looked at him with such belief. He pressed a kiss to the fragrant blond hair at her temple. He didn’t know how he’d inspired such loyalty in not one, but two women. But he had, and it was a precious gift—a second chance at love—if he wanted to take it.

“Lucien?” Her upturned face shone with trust, but underlying the conviction was clear determination.

Lucien sighed. He just knew she was going to be difficult about staying out of his investigation. “Yes?”

“I would like to have a child.”

Her words were like a spear piercing his heart. Sudden and unexpected. Painful.

“No,” he said harshly. He wrenched away from the temptation to seize her in his arms and offer comfort. Guilt and confusion made him unable to face her hurt expression.

“Why not?”

She’d had to ask. The raw emotion he’d held in check since Francesca’s death bubbled out before he could stop it. “Because I don’t want to go through the same thing all over again. I don’t want my wife and child to die and leave me alone.”

Chapter Sixteen

Harsh finality enveloped his voice. Rosalind felt her uncertain grasp on her dreams slipping. Her stomach roiled with fear, followed swiftly by anger. She'd fought for everything in life. Why should the fight for Lucien's attention be any different?

So, she'd resort to her original plan and seduce him. Not that she knew how to go about a seduction. However, she'd watched her cousin flirt with male visitors often enough. Men flocked to Miranda in the hope of her bestowing them with one of her pretty smiles or a gurgle of laughter. It would work. *It has to work.*

She turned to face her brooding husband. Ignoring the nervous stutters inside her chest, she said, "I'm frightened to sleep on my own. Can I sleep in your chamber again tonight?"

At first, she thought he'd balk at her suggestion. His muscular body stiffened beneath the black jacket. Hands fisted at his sides until he caught her watching him. He flung off his tenseness as easily as she discarded a shawl, except in his eyes. They still held pain and wariness. Rosalind edged closer. Before the thought even entered her head, she reached out to offer comfort.

"Don't touch me." Lucien wrenched away before her hand contacted his skin.

Pain sliced through her. Another rejection. Her throat closed up with a giant knot of emotion. She wanted to rail and scream at the unfairness of the situation. Why had it been her who received the gift and not Miranda? Gift! Huh! It was a curse that kept coming back to haunt her with the regularity of the monsters in Mary's ghostly tales.

She turned away to hurry for the door connecting their chambers before Lucien witnessed the tears leaking from her eyes. The only good thing about her gift was she knew for sure Lady Sophia was directly responsible for a lot of the occurrences since her arrival at Castle St. Clare. She'd paid maids and some of the other servants to make life difficult for her. Rosalind

had her suspicions why but needed to confront the woman to confirm plain jealousy was responsible. Lady Sophia coveted Lucien's title and would do anything to remove her.

Huh! Rosalind tried to dislodge the achy lump in her throat with a swallow. Lady Sophia would laugh hysterically if she learned Lucien didn't want her, that he consistently pushed her away.

"Wait." He caught her upper arm and forced her to stop. His hand dropped away the instant she halted.

"I don't bite," she snapped.

Lucien raked a hand through his hair, leaving dark tufts sticking out of his queue. "Hell. I'm sorry, but it's difficult. This isn't an ordinary situation."

"I have to live with it every day."

"Please, go ahead. Make me feel better," he said in a dry tone.

Rosalind stared. Was that a twinkle lurking deep in his dark eyes? Had he made a joke?

"You can sleep in my chamber tonight."

Rosalind stared anew. Their gazes clashed and held. The silence between them stretched. In the distance soft music tinkled, masculine laughter floated up from outside. A soft breeze ruffled the Flemish tapestries covering the walls.

"Where…" Rosalind paused to clear her throat. "Where will you sleep?"

Lucien's gaze intensified. Her skin prickled, not in fear, but a different, more foreign sensation. His gaze dropped to her mouth. The hush grew heavy with expectation. Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips.

Lucien cursed, long and loud, even as he eyed her lips avidly. "Don't do that."

"What?" Rosalind backed up. This time, he stepped closer and raised one hand to trace her mouth with his fingers.

"That," he whispered. "What am I going to do with you? I'm trying to do the right thing, but you make it difficult."

"I'm your wife."

"I know. But I didn't want to care for you."

Rosalind considered his words. He'd loved his first wife. Was there room in his heart for her too?

His thumb brushed her bottom lip and he bent his head. Rosalind couldn’t breathe as he lifted his other hand to cup her head, his dark eyes intent and serious.

He’d kissed her before. She knew what to expect, yet this time seemed different and full of unexpected tension.

“Are you sure you want to sleep in here tonight?” His voice was low. Husky. His eyes glinted in the candlelit room, holding silent questions he hadn’t voiced.

Rosalind was certain. She nodded, turning slightly to nuzzle his hand and press a soft, moist kiss to his palm. “I’m very sure.”

He lowered his head and slowly drew her against his chest.

Apprehension swept through Rosalind when her body came into contact with his. Now that Lucien was finally acquiescing, she had no idea what to do or how to behave. What if she did something wrong? What if she compared unfavorably with his first wife? The thought made her tense, horror flooding her thoughts. What if she did something so wrong he never let her enter his chamber again?

“Having second thoughts?” He was so close now, his warm breath wafted across her cheek. Port and the faint tang of tobacco plus a scent uniquely Lucien made her sigh and relax.

“I’m not sure what to do next. I sort of know what happens, but what if I do the wrong thing?”

Lucien chuckled and the infectious sound made her lips curl up at the corners. “I know exactly what to do,” he said.

An intriguing dimple winked at the corner of his mouth and entranced her. She lifted her hand to run her fingers over the small dent. Instantly, images flooded her mind. She gasped. Her gaze flew to Lucien’s. “I have no clothes on!”

The dimple reappeared. “I know.”

Her brow creased in a frown. “You’re wearing clothes.”

Lucien grinned, and when Rosalind attempted to speak, he placed a hand over her mouth. “Shh,” he murmured. “You talk too much.”

The candles flickered. Lucien lowered his hand, pressed a fleeting kiss over her mouth. “Can you read my mind all the time?”

“My grandmother taught me to block. I can block most thoughts as long as I’m calm. Sometimes they slip in, but I have to be touching the person.”

“We’ll probably come into physical contact,” he murmured, an undertone of laughter in his voice. “I’d better watch what I’m thinking.”

This teasing, laughing Lucien was a stranger to her. Relaxed and approachable, he made her crave more of the same in the future. His pointed gaze made her self-conscious. She sighed, knowing she could trust him.

Lucien placed his hands on her shoulders and took half a step back. Slowly his gaze trailed downward to linger at her lips. Heat bloomed on her skin. Rosalind sucked in a breath as his attention moved lower. It was as if he caressed her. She wanted to fidget, but a strange lethargy held her in place. Suddenly her clothes were heavy and cumbersome. And Lucien seemed to know.

“Let me play maid tonight.” He pushed her down onto a walnut chair. In the dressing-table looking glass, she saw their twin reflections. Lucien appeared dark and somber in his usual black attire while her blond hair glinted in the candlelight.

Lucien’s fingers deftly removed the two ivory combs fastening her hair. His fingers worked through her blond locks until they spilled past her shoulders.

“I’ve thought about seeing you like this,” he confessed. His hand smoothed across her hair. A relaxed sigh drifted from Rosalind as his fingers combed and massaged her scalp. She eyed his reflection. His intent expression was easily discernable with his restrained hair. She liked it best when he allowed his hair to hang loosely about his face, the curls springing to life.

“Stand for me, Rosalind.”

She rose on unsteady legs. His deft fingers dealt with her gown and petticoat. Laces unfastened and tapes were untied as if by magic. The silken fabric dropped to the floor with a soft whoosh. He whisked her hoops and stays from her body. Rosalind chewed on her bottom lip, anxiety rising once more. Lucien tugged her against his chest, his mouth nuzzling behind her ear. Velvet fabric tickled her back. Hot, moist breath fanned her neck and the sensation did little to aid her wobbly knees. The heat in the room intensified, despite her lack of clothing. Muscles constricted with alarm but the feeling of his lips on her heated skin was most pleasant. A shiver moved down her body.

“Don’t be frightened,” he murmured.

“I’m not,” she said, and knew it for a lie. It was hard to act brave when the future looked so hazy.

His hand toyed with her chemise strap. He turned her to face him, cupping her head until she met his gaze. His eyes were wild and stormy. Hot. Her pulse skittered, her tongue darting out to moisten her dry lips again. Lucien gave a soft laugh as if he found her nerves amusing. Rosalind stiffened.

“Relax. I’m not laughing at you.” He smiled and brushed one finger over her quivering mouth. “Your face is easy to read. Your emotions give you away.”

Lucien bent his head, closing the gap between them. The touch of his lips was different from what she expected. His kiss was soft and fleeting, tentative as if he was trying not to scare her. His lips moved over hers, and she felt a flick of his tongue. Startled, she opened her mouth and his tongue swept inside.

Smell. Taste. Her senses bombarded her as she experienced close proximity to Lucien. Curiosity burned inside her and, greedily, she wanted to try everything. Her hands fluttered before settling on his shoulders. His black jacket was rough to her touch while his velvet waistcoat felt soft and luxurious. Her hands slipped under to discover the white linen shirt beneath.

“Would you like me to take off my waistcoat and shirt?”

Rosalind considered the idea. “Yes, please.” Heat suffused her face, but Lucien didn’t seem to mind. Her brow creased momentarily. This was nothing like the scenario her aunt had described. The dark fumbling and mortifying touches of a husband forcing his way into the bed. Pain for a short time, then left blessedly alone until the next time.

Candles spluttered in the wall sconces. Rosalind shifted to allow the light to shine on her husband.

Her mouth rounded as Lucien started to remove his clothes. Finally, his shirt dropped down his arms and whispered to a puddle at his feet. Her gaze rose to meet his. “You’re beautiful.” Not even the scars on his face or the one on his upper shoulder detracted from his presence.

“Don’t let that get around,” he said dryly. “I’ve worked very hard to scare all the women away with my ugly scars.”

Her hand hovered over the bare skin of his chest. “Can I touch you?”

His laugh was short, his voice husky and low. “Please.”

Dark hair grew on his chest. It was soft beneath her fingertips. She edged closer, near enough to press her nose against his skin. His scent filled every breath. Something mystical. Oriental. That was it. The aroma reminded Rosalind of the small sandalwood boxes that hailed from the Orient.

His hands tugged her against his chest. Instead of the scratchy cloth of his jacket, his skin was smooth and warmer. Hot to the touch. Her mouth opened and without thought, she kissed him in the middle of his chest. He groaned and tightened his hold.

Then he laughed. “You, madam, are going to be the death of me with your questions and your curiosity. Come, let us lie on the bed before my knees give out.”

“Oh, do your knees feel wobbly too? I thought perhaps I’d drunk too much wine,” Rosalind said.

He made a small choking noise.

“Are you all right? Should I hit you on the back?”

Lucien laughed hard then. He wiped a splash of moisture from his eyes and grinned at her. “When I first saw you, I knew you’d be trouble.”

“I know my gift is a curse, but I do try not to be a nuisance.”

“I know you do, sweetheart.” He snatched her off her feet and took three hurried steps to the bed.

Rosalind fell to the mattress and bounced lightly. The mattress dipped as Lucien sat on the edge of the bed. He slid off her pink satin shoes and tossed them to the floor. The sensation of his hands on her legs made her freeze. His hands slid up until he came to her garters. Deft movements untied them in a trice. Then he peeled down her stockings, his callused hands smoothing them to her ankles, sending a shiver down her spine. Her pulse raced, her body awash in sensations she’d never experienced before.

And there was much more to come. Pain. Would she bear it? Sighing, she decided yes. To have a child of her own to love, she would bear any amount of pain.

Lucien removed his shoes and stockings while Rosalind watched with avid curiosity. His hands settled on the fastening of his breeches. Hesitation skirted his face.

“Is it necessary to take off your breeches?” Rosalind asked.

Another small choking noise escaped from the depths of his throat. His mouth twitched.

“Maybe not,” he murmured and, grinning, he moved up the bed, his upper body covering her chest.

Not an unpleasant experience. The friction of her breasts against the sheer cotton of her chemise made her wriggle. Heat engulfed her face, her body; and low down in that place between her legs, an ache intensified. She squirmed a little more.

“Be still,” Lucien ordered.

Rosalind froze, not at his order but at the strange guttural groan he emitted. Her eyes widened. “Is something wrong?”

“No.” Again his voice sounded strange. “Hell.”

He lowered his head and kissed her. Warmth surged from his lips. Heat. Flickers of sensation exploded, sending tendrils of heat from wherever he touched. His hand on her shoulder, his weight on her upper body—both felt strange but right. His mouth traced a path across her cheek, down her neck and, strangely, her ear.

Rosalind melted like a snowdrift under the rising sun. Who would have thought a kiss on her ear would feel so…so wondrous. One sensation merged into another. His hands, rough from working with the men in the village, elicited magical sparks that prickled up and down her limbs.

“Let me take your chemise off, Rosalind. I want to see you.”

“See me?” Even though she’d seen herself naked in his thoughts, the act of disrobing in front of her husband was not something she’d considered much before tonight. Her aunt hadn’t mentioned taking off clothes, and neither had Mary. Wouldn’t it make her vulnerable? What if he teased her or scorned her body like her cousin used to? She studied his bare chest and frowned. “Can’t you see me now?”

Lucien trailed his hand across her shoulder. “I would like to see your skin, your breasts. I want to touch you and feel your skin.” His hand moved a little lower, the lazy sweep of his fingers grazing one breast.

Rosalind took a deep breath. “I’ll take my chemise off if you remove your breeches.”

His grin was wide and instant. He levered away from her, his hands moving to unfasten his breeches. His eyes held a silent dare, along with heat and a strange yearning that made Rosalind desperate to please him. Her hand hovering at the hem of her chemise, she steeled herself and whipped the white cotton garment over her head. Clothing rustled and, when she risked a look, she discovered none of her naughty visions had prepared her.

Her aunt and Mary had lied. *It* was much bigger than the appendage Mary had described. Not exactly ugly or scary. No…more interesting. Different. She lifted her gaze to meet his quizzical smile. They stared at each other for long seconds before Rosalind reached a trembling hand out to touch a pectoral muscle. “You’re brown all over.”

“I go swimming in the sea.”

Rosalind’s gaze flew to his. “With no clothes?”

“The water feels like silk against your skin.”

“I’d like to do that.” Her tone held wistfulness. “Can I go with you next time?”

“I’d enjoy that,” Lucien murmured, an undercurrent of laughter shading his voice. “Come here.” He leaned over her, pressing his lips to her shoulder. A shudder sped down her body. Then he kissed her. His tongue swirled across her lips and this time she knew to open her mouth a little. The kisses were sweet and addictive, rich and heady, tasting of port and summer sunshine.

While he kissed her, his hands were at her shoulders, but then they moved. She gasped in a breath, her heart thumping like the waves pounding at the base of the cliff below the castle. “What are you doing?” Her aunt had told her marriage bed activities were quick, and her husband would leave her bed after ten minutes at the most. Her brow crinkled. They’d been here for some time and all Hastings had done was kiss her.

“I want to learn your body, so I know it as well as my own.” His fingers skimmed down her arm.

“Oh.”

“Is that all right?”

Rosalind considered his words. The touching and kissing wasn’t so bad. “I think so.”

“I’m glad you approve.” He paused to flash white teeth at her in a wide grin. “You don’t have to lie so quiet and still. You’re allowed to touch me too.”

The idea appealed a lot. She set out to quench her curiosity, to search for the similarities and the differences between them.

Lucien couldn’t help his amusement. It was the way Rosalind threw herself into every situation—with a little trepidation but lots of heart and determination. His mouth quivered. *Let’s see how she handles this.*

He rolled, tugging Rosalind on top of him. She squeaked, her mouth rounding, her brows shooting upward. “So you can explore easier,” he said.

Her hands clutched his upper arms, nails biting into his skin. Instead of pain, arrows of sheer need collected at his groin. He closed his eyes, gritting his teeth. Slow. He needed to give Rosalind time, but the urge to roll her over and thrust his cock into her tight warmth was almost overwhelming.

Shy, hesitant hands crept across his chest. He could hear her breathing, the tick of a clock, the occasional splatter of wax from a candle.

He opened his eyes and the concentration on her pale face made his heart race even faster. “Kiss me.”

Slowly she leaned toward him but instead of kissing him on the lips, she kissed his chest, his neck. Shy and hesitant at first, then with more assurance when she realized he wouldn’t protest. Her mouth grazed a flat nipple and his breath escaped with a hiss. She froze.

“Did that hurt?”

“No.”

“You liked it?”

“I did. I do, but I’m not sure how much exploration I can take.”

Her bottom lip stuck out in a cute pout, and he had the sudden urge to sink his teeth into that lip then soothe it with kisses. Hell, he needed to speed up this process before he went mad. He snaked a hand behind her head, tugging her flush with his aroused body from shoulder to groin.

“Oh,” Rosalind said, moving aside and peering at his groin. “Does that hurt?” One small hand crept downward. She wrapped her hand around his rod, the heat in her touch making him want to groan out loud. God, her touch felt good. As if she could read his mind, she slid her hand up and down, exploring him, until he thought he might go cross-eyed attempting to restrain himself.

Lucien tightened his arms around her. “Sweetheart, no it doesn’t hurt. Please.” Needing to distract her, he cupped one breast and explored her luscious curves. The scent of flowers teased at his nostrils. What would she taste like? He held her away from him, replacing his hand with his mouth. Hell, she tasted sweet. He should have known. She moaned softly. His hands tightened at her sensual reaction while his mouth laved her pouting nipple. His plain English mouse had many hidden qualities, which only now he was coming to appreciate.

The pressure in his groin urged him to make haste, to dispense with patience, and for once Lucien was in full agreement. He kissed her, ravishing her lips, tasting, nipping. Hands explored, shaping her breasts and moving lower. His hand skimmed the hot, sweet place at the juncture of her thighs. She stiffened.

"Relax," he murmured. "You can tell me to stop at any time and I will." If he could. He wasn't so sure of his ability to halt should she ask.

Lucien stroked her thighs. So soft and pale. And bruised, he noted with a frown. One knee bore a graze while numerous scratches marked the pale perfection of her thighs. He slid down and touched his lips to an angry mottled yellow bruise. He trailed his fingers upward. Warm feminine flesh greeted his touch. His fingers moved, circled slowly until the tenseness left her body and her thighs fell apart. The scent of her, sweet-smelling and delicious, made him tremble. He pressed a kiss to her abdomen and slid up to kiss her breasts again. When her hands cradled his head, holding him to her, a surge of pure lust spread through his veins.

"You know it will hurt," he said, looking down at her slightly flushed face. Her blue eyes darkened, her bottom lip caught between white teeth.

"I don't mind."

She sounded sure this was what she wanted. But she was apprehensive. Lucien covered her lips with his even as he parted her legs. *Take it slow and easy. Slow and easy.* He pushed into her, the sensation almost more than he could bear after months of celibacy. Her warm, feminine flesh massaged his cock. He sucked in a deep breath, reinforcing his need to take his time.

"That doesn't hurt." Rosalind sounded surprised.

A smothered chuckle escaped Lucien as he reached her maidenhead. "Not finished yet."

He battled the need to thrust hard. A deep breath and gritting of teeth didn't help the urgent desire thrumming through his veins. He kissed her and surged inside her until he buried his cock deep. She flinched. Hell. He pulled away enough to see her face even as he cursed his lack of willpower. He kissed her hard, moving in soft, measured strokes.

Gradually she relaxed, and Lucien knew everything would be all right when her small hands stroked his back and flanks, urging him on. Her breathing quickened. He stroked a little faster. Harder.

Just when he thought he could hold on for no longer, Rosalind gasped and tensed. Tiny ripples massaged his shaft. He thrust once. Twice. He

groaned, his heart thumping. Another thrust and pleasure flooded his body.

"Rosalind." He held her tight until his heartbeat finally slowed to normal. Then he looked down and smiled because her small face looked radiant.

"Is it always like this? Making babies?"

Lucien tensed, the smile losing some of its crispness. God, what if they had made a child?

"Lucien?"

His breath eased back out. "No, it's not always like this."

"Can we do it again?"

A baby.

Hell. What if something happened to Rosalind?

"Don't leave the castle without me. I mean it. If I'm not available to escort you, stay at the castle. Inside the castle, and not outside wandering about the gardens."

Rosalind stared at him. She snapped her teeth together. "What have you done with my husband?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Minutes ago we were making love and now you're issuing orders, treating me like a servant."

"This is no joke. I mean it. Don't leave the castle without me."

"I promise to take a footman with me."

"Not good enough." Lucien yanked her to him, jerking a surprised yelp from her. "Not a footman, Rosalind. A footman is no protection. Me."

Her eyes narrowed, and she wrenched from his touch. "That sounds like an order."

"It is."

"But why? Nothing has happened to…" She trailed off as she registered his glare.

"Nothing? You were shot at, pushed over a cliff, then fell down the stairs, and someone watches you whenever you're in your chamber."

"You forgot being pushed out of bed."

"Damn it, don't be flippant. You could have died."

"I didn't think you cared."

Lucien sat up in the bed and glared at his troublesome English mouse. Didn't care? "You're my wife," he snapped.

"Not a servant," she countered sweetly.

Lucien didn’t wish to discuss the matter. He didn’t want to explain. Instead he did the only thing he knew would distract his wife. He grabbed her and tucked her against his naked body. His mouth slammed down on hers, gentling when she responded.

Perhaps they would make a baby after all—if that was the only way to keep her safe.

Chapter Seventeen

Rosalind limped into the breakfast room eager to see Lucien. Her face fell when she found the room empty save a maid. She'd thought Lucien would remain by her side, but instead he'd left like a thief in the night. Disappointment stabbed her, spreading niggling doubt. What if Lucien regretted last night?

The maid bobbed a quick curtsey. "Would you like a pot of chocolate, Lady Hastings?"

"Thank you, Janet."

The maid bustled from the room, and Rosalind helped herself to eggs before taking a seat at the table. Footsteps in the corridor made her head jerk up, but the new arrival was Charles. Mansfield arrived shortly afterward.

Rosalind grinned at the two bleary-eyed men. "Just returning or leaving?"

"A night out," Charles mumbled, holding his head.

Mansfield grunted.

Rosalind arched a brow, her nose wrinkling at the scent of cheap perfume and stale tobacco originating from their clothes. "Coffee?"

"Thank you. You're looking very fetching today," Charles said. "How are you getting on with Hastings?"

Heat converged in her cheeks. Rosalind concentrated on pouring coffee without spilling it. Janet returned with a pot of chocolate. Rosalind poured a cup for herself. She blew on the hot liquid before taking a cautious sip.

"Ah," Charles said. "Will you be announcing the imminent arrival of an heir soon?"

Mansfield sipped his coffee, affecting a bored look. "I'm sure they'll tell us when they're ready. You don't need to prod for information, Charles."

"Am I embarrassing you?"

"Yes," Rosalind said. On purpose, no doubt.

Mansfield yawned, holding up a languid hand to cover his gaping mouth. “A group of us are going on a pastoral outing today. Would you like to join us?”

Rosalind glanced out the window. A shaft of sunlight pierced the grimy glass, dust motes dancing about the floor. The lure of the warm sunshine and crisp air was like a siren song tempting her to play. She hesitated, thinking of Lucien’s request for her not to leave the castle without him.

“You don’t have to come,” Mansfield said, fighting another yawn.

“No, it’s not that. I’d love to go outdoors on such a beautiful day. When are we to leave?” Surely he couldn’t object to his friends escorting her on an excursion.

“In an hour. Can you be ready by then?” Charles asked.

“Yes.” She’d inform Lady Augusta of her destination, so Lucien wouldn’t worry. She’d be safe in a group, especially with both Mansfield and Charles present. “Yes, I’ll meet you in the courtyard.”

***

An hour later the chaise clattered from the courtyard. Charles drove while Mansfield rode his bay alongside.

Charles cast her a quick smirk and snapped a whip to direct the pair to the dark avenue. “Hastings looks more relaxed these days. It’s good to see him smile again. How is his memory?”

“Is Hastings’s memory returning? That’s good news.” Mansfield clicked his tongue to urge on his horse.

His loss of memory haunted him. Rosalind had witnessed his troubled expression when he thought he was unwatched. “Just small flashes now and then. Nothing important. I think he finds the flashes more confusing than enlightening.”

Mansfield glanced at Rosalind. “He would tell you.”

She blushed at his meaning tone. Charles tapped the rumps of both horses with the whip to quicken the pace. A soft breeze tugged her hat as the chaise raced along the cliff-top road. The sea appeared calmer than normal, the roar of the waves more muted than usual. In the distance, a ship in full sail scampered toward the horizon.

Rosalind smiled at Charles. “I didn’t ask where everyone is meeting.”

“Lady Sophia and her mother, Lady Radford, are organizing the outing. It’s taking place at the edge of the beech forest on their land. You’ll enjoy the scenery. There’s a brook with good fishing.”

Fool. In such a hurry to leave the castle, she’d neglected to ask the important where. Now she’d have to listen to Lady Sophia’s digs all afternoon along with her veiled innuendos about witchcraft.

A pity she couldn’t prove the other woman’s perfidy. She could, however, make life uncomfortable for Lady Sophia. “Lady Sophia thinks I’m a witch.”

Mansfield choked on a laugh. “We’d heard.”

Charles cocked his head, surveying her with clear interest. “Are you?”

“Of course not,” Rosalind scoffed.

“You have a cat.” Mansfield urged his horse onward to keep within conversation range. “A black cat.”

“The two of you are as bad as Lady Sophia,” Rosalind said. “The idea is nonsense. I don’t wish to discuss it further.”

Charles’s mouth quivered as he fiddled with the silver lace at his left cuff. “There’s a lot we’re not allowed to discuss with you.”

“We’ve arrived,” Rosalind announced.

“So we have.” Mansfield halted his horse and dismounted. After tethering his bay, he held his arm out to Rosalind and she placed her hand on it. The warmth from his skin seared her fingertips, usually a sure sign of a vision whether she wished it or not. She instinctively blocked, relieved when only a sense of urgency leaked through, along with one particularly lascivious memory of the previous evening. Hiding her blush by pretending to study the scenery, she made a mental note to ask Lucien if men and women really did that together. Perhaps they could try it soon.

“Is that Lady Sophia and Lady Radford arriving now?” she asked, wanting to direct the men’s attention elsewhere while she grappled with her embarrassment. If she wished to remain calm, she’d need to keep Mansfield at a distance, otherwise his bawdy thoughts would keep her in a state of turmoil.

“It is indeed.” Once he’d secured the horses, Charles took possession of her other arm. “Shall we?”

Rosalind smiled but her muscles tensed. *Concentrate*. Inside her mind, ivy started to grow on her brick wall, the wiry green strands creating a

second shield to bolster her block. She did *not* need to learn the lewd memories of both men.

They strolled toward the advancing calash. Several other conveyances followed in a procession. Passengers and servants disgorged from the vehicles.

Lady Sophia approached with mincing steps, her nose wrinkled in a frown. “Lady Hastings, I didn’t realize you were attending our small social gathering.” Her smile was bright as it touched the two men but faded when landing on Rosalind. “It’s very selfish of you to monopolize the company of two eligible men.”

“Lady Sophia.” Rosalind inclined her head sharply before turning a beseeching look on Charles to divert the chit’s attention. *Scheming hussy.* When she could prove the charges, she’d call Lady Sophia on her treachery.

Charles closed one eye in a wink and offered his arm. “Lady Sophia, allow me to escort you.”

“Nicely done,” Mansfield said for her hearing only.

“Thank you.” Rosalind drew a quick breath and focused on blocking Mansfield. She couldn’t believe she’d left her gloves sitting on the dresser in her chamber. Mary wouldn’t have let her attend a social gathering without her gloves. The memory of Mary’s scolding succeeded in shoring up her mental wall even as tears misted her eyes. “How far do we need to walk?” she asked, conscious of the need to appear normal, especially with rumors of witchcraft flying around the village. The last thing she needed was more attention.

Mansfield stopped and turned to study her face. “You’re very pale. How is your ankle?” He frowned in concern. “Should I carry you? You look like my sister when—I say! You’re not increasing, are you?”

Indignation burst from her. “Neither you nor Charles have any right to ask such a personal thing. When Lucien and I have happy news to impart, we’ll be sure to tell you.”

His face froze momentarily before he smiled. “I’m sorry. You’re right. My only excuse is that Charles, Hastings, and I are more brothers than friends. Hastings is the first to wed, and it changes things between us.”

His thoughts jumped in agitation, and she caught a flash of jealousy before she calmed herself enough to block again.

“Do you think you’ll marry soon?” She hid her surge of amusement. They were still like young boys at heart. Charles had told her Lucien and

Mansfield were very competitive. Obviously, Mansfield still bore the cutthroat streak and allowed envy to creep into his thoughts. A very human reaction, and one she'd experienced with her cousin.

His mouth twisted. "My mother wants me to wed."

"But?"

"It's complicated."

"It usually is." Rosalind smiled, totally in charity with his reply. When Miranda had refused to entertain marriage with Lucien, the obligation had fallen to her. Family politics were always complex and fraught with danger.

The path narrowed and Mansfield ushered Rosalind in front of him. The need to block dissolved when she released his arm. A relief. Blocking for long periods of time always caused her head to ache.

Up ahead, the path widened into a clearing. Surrounded by trees, the grassy area reminded Rosalind of an island in the middle of the sea.

"Lady Hastings," Lady Radford called. "Would you help Sophia set out the tables and chairs while I direct the servants with the food? I want them to take particular care with the cherry tarts so they don't spoil. Perhaps if you finish before me you can direct them to set out the meats and pies. Have them spread a cloth to cover the food until we're ready to eat. Mansfield, there are more people to come. Perhaps you could wait and guide them to the clearing?"

Both Mansfield and Charles strode off with alacrity. Rosalind dithered, not wanting to go anywhere near Lady Sophia, not when her temper strained so close to the surface, but there would be no gainsaying Lady Radford. Steel cloaked the woman's softly voiced words. When Lady Radford's brows drew together, Rosalind nodded acquiescence and strolled over to Lady Sophia.

"I don't need your help," Lady Sophia whispered in a fierce tone when Rosalind joined her. She stuck her nose into the air and turned her back in a pointed snub. "Gerald, set the tables there and there. Place the chairs and blankets beneath the tree on the bank of the stream. Are you still here?" she demanded rudely.

Irritation flashed through Rosalind. She'd never done anything to incur Lady Sophia's wrath. Nothing. Yet, the woman had treated her like an imposter from the moment of their first meeting.

"Well?" Lady Sophia snapped.

Rosalind wasn't sure if she intended the remark for her or the servants. The servants weren't sure either and cast uneasy glances at Lady Sophia before her glare had them rushing to carry out her instructions.

Rosalind took the opportunity to step closer. She grabbed Lady Sophia's forearm and grasped it tightly. Lady Sophia's thoughts came through loud and clear, bombarding her with their viciousness. The woman wanted Lucien and she intended to get him, by fair means or foul, even if his scarred face disgusted her.

Colorless sparrow. *She is nothing*.

Right! That was it. She didn't need to listen to her insulting thoughts.

"Lucien is mine," Rosalind said in a low undertone, letting go of Lady Sophia's arm to break the connection. Anger throbbed between them. "Lucien is my husband and will remain mine no matter what accidents you arrange for me."

"You're a witch," Lady Sophia said.

"I notice you're not denying anything." Rosalind scanned the clearing to see if any of the servants or newly arrived guests were watching them. To her relief, the servants were engaged in setting out the tables and food while most of the men studied the stream, searching for trout. The women clustered around Lady Radford, their chatter and laughter ringing through the clearing. She turned her attention back to Lady Sophia. "I know you paid a maid to frighten me away."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

The surge of color to Sophia's cheeks told her the truth. "She's admitted ruining my clothes and causing me to fall down the stairs."

Lady Sophia narrowed her eyes, a smile of triumph curving her lips. "You can't prove it."

"Ah, but I can. Beth has confessed. She said you paid her to frighten me. She's willing to swear to it. Did you tell her about the secret passage?" The maid hadn't confessed, of course. Not yet, but that wouldn't stop Rosalind from wringing the truth from Lady Sophia. "And I believe the men you paid to shoot at Mary and I while we were out walking will also confess. Did you pay a footman or a stable lad to shove me over the cliff, to place wasps under the pony's harness? Admit it. I know you paid the maid. She told me." Rosalind grabbed Lady Sophia's hand, hoping to gain more information to prove her perfidy. Lady Sophia wrenched away before she could read a thing.

“What tunnels? I don’t know what you’re talking about. Besides, Hastings won’t believe you. As soon as he’s free of your clutches, he’ll marry me.”

Yet Lady Sophia couldn’t even look at Lucien’s face. This was all because she desired a title. “That’s not what he said last night in our chamber.” Rosalind couldn’t help the trace of smugness. She relived the sensual caress of his callused hand when he touched her bare shoulder, her breasts, and savored the truth. Lucien loved her—his wife. She knew it even if he wasn’t aware of the fact.

“He won’t have anything to do with you when he learns you’re a witch.”

Rosalind snorted. “If I was a witch, I’d make a wart grow on the tip of your nose. He’s heard the rumors and thinks they’re nonsense.”

“But everyone says you’re a witch.” Lady Sophia sounded bewildered and unsure.

“Because that’s what you’ve told them. You’re jealous. You see yourself as the lady of St. Clare.” The sour expression on Lady Sophia’s face told her she was right, and she pushed her advantage. “You will never, ever be in that position.”

“You don’t even share a bed with Hastings,” Lady Sophia said smugly.

“Are you sure about that?” Rosalind allowed a smirk of triumph to form on her lips.

Lady Sophia’s gaze snapped to Rosalind’s. Indecisiveness played across her features. “You’re lying.”

“Our private relationship is none of your business. But I’ll tell you this. Lucien and I are husband and wife—in *every* way.”

The color bleached from Lady Sophia’s face. “That’s not true.”

“It won’t be long before we have a child.” Rosalind knew she was being petty, forcing the truth down Lady Sophia’s throat, but the woman deserved it for her treachery. “Stay away from Hastings, or I’ll press charges. The local magistrate will take a dim view of the matter. The scandal will ruin your reputation.” Without another word, Rosalind turned away and sauntered over to the servants unpacking food from large cane baskets.

Charles strolled across the clearing to join her. “What was that all about?”

“A private discussion,” Rosalind said.

“About Hastings?”

“Go and fish or something.” Rosalind’s lips twitched in the beginnings of a smile. “I must supervise the servants before Lady Radford takes me to task.”

In truth, the servants didn’t require instruction. They were efficient, well trained, and almost finished with their tasks. Instead, Rosalind used the time to ponder her situation. She wondered if Lady Sophia would heed her warnings. A child would certainly cement her claim on Lucien.

Lady Radford clapped her hands together and raised her voice for all to hear. “I thought we’d walk to the folly on the other side of the copse before we break our fast.”

Enthusiasm greeted her suggestion, and most of the guests drifted down the narrow track in pairs.

Since she was still favoring her ankle a little, Rosalind found a pleasant spot on the bank of the stream and sat to mull over everything that had happened to her and Lucien. She’d read Lady Sophia easily. The other woman hadn’t known about the tunnels. Her surprise had been evident. Puzzlement furrowed Rosalind’s forehead as she pondered the matter. Was it possible there were two villains? Was Lucien right in thinking Hawk was responsible? She was unsure, but she needed to discover answers for Lucien somehow. It was the only way they’d find a measure of peace.

The time passed agreeably, and Rosalind rose to pluck a bouquet of wildflowers for Lady Augusta. Soon men and women arrived back from their invigorating walk. Charles and Mansfield sought her out, Lady Sophia winging a scowl at her when she noticed the two men had left her bevy of suitors.

Charles noticed. “She really doesn’t like you.”

Lady Radford thankfully interrupted with an announcement. “Please let the servants know what you’d like to eat.”

They broke into groups, taking seats at the tables spaced around the clearing or sprawling out on blankets. Servants bustled about and a jovial mood ensued with gay laughter and repartee. A sudden shout broke into the joviality. Like everyone else, Rosalind turned to see who dared interrupt one of Lady Radford’s rustic outings.

“What’s the meaning of this interruption?” Lady Radford’s steely tones cut through the burst of conversation.

The footman’s face was red from exertion, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he gasped for air. “It’s Mansfield’s sister. Took a fall from her

horse. They're asking for Mansfield."

Charles jumped to his feet. "We'll go now."

"Of course." Rosalind stood hastily. "I'm skilled with healing. I might be able to help."

"Surely you don't have to leave as well, Charles? You promised to tell us about the freak show at Bartholomew Fair." Lady Sophia fluttered her eyelashes at Charles, her lips shaped in a moue of disappointment. "We were looking forward to hearing about the wolf lady."

Mansfield stayed a protest by agreeing. "It's all right, Charles. You stay, but Lady Hastings, my mother isn't very good with blood or injuries. If you wouldn't mind attending my sister at the manor, I'd be much obliged."

"Rosalind, you go with Mansfield. Take the chaise," Charles said to his friend. "I'll ride your bay back to the castle."

Rosalind nodded, turning to Mansfield. "Of course. I'll do everything I can to aid your sister."

***

Before Rosalind knew it, she was in the chaise with Mansfield and on the way to Mansfield manor.

Mansfield touched her forearm to draw her attention. "You're very quiet. Did our hurried trip back to the chaise harm your ankle again?"

"No, it's fine now. I scarcely feel a twinge," Rosalind said with a smile. "How old is your sister?"

"It will probably be Charlotte who has fallen. She is twelve and too bold for her own good." Mansfield's hand tightened momentarily, digging into her flesh, searing it with heat. A flash of jealousy pierced her mental blocks, a splash of bright red and green swirling together in a mass, the jagged emotions battering her defenses.

Luckily, the burst faded the instant he broke the contact to concentrate on directing the horses. She bit back a gasp, relief hitting when she no longer needed to block. Something was bothering Mansfield. Excitement filled his thoughts, along with anger and envy. Strange—most people didn't assault her mind like that. Perhaps he was more concerned about his sister than he acknowledged?

He clicked between his teeth, urging the horses on with his signal. They were both quiet for a time, the rhythmic swish of the wheels almost putting

her to sleep. The sharp jolt of the chaise hitting a pothole jerked her fully awake, and she grabbed the edge of the seat to right herself. Her gaze focused on an ornate gateway as they clattered past.

“Isn’t that the turning to your manor?”

The excitement in his mind blazed openly on his face then. “We’re not going to the manor, Rosalind.” Mansfield urged the team into a gallop. The wind whistled past them, and her blue silk hat sailed away before she could save it.

“But I thought your sister was at the manor.” She didn’t have to pretend her confusion, but Mansfield didn’t hear. The wind snatched away her words as he took a hairpin corner at an impossible speed. She clutched the edge of the seat and held on for grim death. It was too late now to wish she’d listened to Lucien and stayed at the castle.

***

“Rosalind? Rosalind! Where are you?” Lucien stomped from her chamber into his. Both were empty. He eyed the empty rooms with misgiving before storming down the stairs in search of Lady Augusta, a maid or anyone who would know of his wife’s location. He found his aunt in the Blue Parlor.

“Aunt Augusta, have you seen Rosalind?”

Lady Augusta looked up from her needlework. “She went on an excursion with Charles and Mansfield. They mentioned the beech copse and Lady Radford’s cherry tarts. No cause for alarm, surely?”

She should be all right with Charles and Mansfield, yet his gut churned. He wanted her at his side. Safe. He shouldn’t have left her this morning without talking to her, but he’d suffered from second and third thoughts. It had taken him time to sort through them to the important issues, to gather the nerve to take his second chance, just as Francesca had made him promise.

“Stop behaving like a mooncalf, boy. Go and do something useful. Rosalind will be back later this afternoon. Go. I want peace, and I won’t have tranquility with you standing there glowering.”

“I need to check the progress of the roofing in the village.”

Lady Augusta rolled her eyes in exasperation. “Then what are you waiting for, Hastings?”

“Indeed. Your servant, ma’am.” Lucien bowed and strode through the Great Hall and out into the courtyard. Sunshine blinded him for an instant. He took comfort from the fact Rosalind wasn’t walking by herself. Charles and Mansfield would keep her safe.

Needing action to soothe his agitation, Lucien decided to walk to the stables instead of sending for a stable lad to collect Oberon.

The head groom spied him coming. “Did yer want the black saddled, my lord?”

“Yes, please, Bishop.”

The groom gestured at two of the stable boys. They disappeared, returning five minutes later with a dancing Oberon.

“Full of oats, he is, my lord. Even after the run this morning.”

Lucien nodded, taking the reins from the stable boy. He swung up into the saddle, reining his mount in. His mind kept returning to Rosalind.

“Anything wrong, my lord?”

Lucien forced a smile, which widened when he noticed the man focused on a point just above his head. He was becoming so used to Rosalind’s lack of reaction, he’d almost forgotten his face was disfigured.

“Nothing,” he said. “How long ago did Lady Hastings leave? Did they take the carriage?”

“They took the chaise. About three hours ago, my lord.”

Lucien dipped his head in acknowledgement and urged Oberon forward. There was nothing to worry about, but still his instincts churned, warning him of the danger in letting Rosalind out of his sight. He pressed Oberon into a gallop. The sooner he arrived at the village and completed his mission, the sooner he could return to Rosalind.

***

“Where are we going?” Rosalind scanned Mansfield’s hard visage, not liking the unease rippling up her spine. Something wasn’t right. “Why are you driving so fast? I know you’re worried about your sister, but surely it would be better if we arrived in one piece?”

Working on instinct, she stretched out a trembling hand, steeling herself to touch Mansfield. She’d pretend to grab him for balance, because she had to read his mind, learn what was going on and why they were really traveling at breakneck speed.

At first, she saw nothing, her instinctive block holding. Then the fog clouding his thoughts lifted, leaving a clear picture.

A man stood on the deck of a sailing ship, his hands gripping the wheel. Waves crashed over the bow as it plowed through the water. Dark hair blew in the wind, while the man balanced with ease, his head thrown back in laughter—almost daring Mother Nature to do her worst.

Rosalind frowned in confusion. That didn't help much. "Tell me! Where are we going?"

"There's been a change of plans."

She jerked her hand away. "I don't understand."

"There's nothing wrong with my sister."

"What? But…you're kidnapping me? Why? Are you in league with Lady Sophia?" Questions poured from her in a desire to understand. Everything was as clear as the blanket fogs that crept in from the sea to surround Castle St. Clare.

"We're going on a journey."

Rosalind didn't like his answer, disquiet stirring to greater depths, making her heart punch against her ribs. She had to do something. She couldn't just sit here and let him steal her away. *Think*. Mansfield's memory of a boat must mean something. "Are you a smuggler?"

A teasing smile tugged at his lips. "Surely you know better than that, Rosalind."

She glanced at him and suddenly knew, without touching or reading his thoughts.

Hawk.

Frantically, Rosalind searched for a weapon, even as she recalled Hawk's dark hair. Perhaps a wig? Could Mansfield really be Hawk? The chaise was traveling too fast for her to jump. "Lucien will come after me," she shouted above the rattle of the equipage and the thunder of horses' hooves.

An edge of danger tinged Mansfield's laugh. "I'm counting on it." He slowed the team enough for them to hear each other speak, but not enough for her to escape.

Rosalind glared. The man wanted to gloat. It was obvious by the triumph shining in his eyes. She wouldn't ask. No, for Lucien's sake, she needed to learn the truth. She must ask questions. "I don't understand. Why are you doing this? What have I done to you?"

“Nothing, it’s your husband,” he drawled with distinct mockery.

“But Lucien is your friend. You said yourself the three of you are like brothers.”

Mansfield snorted. “Shows what you know.”

They took the corner at an alarming speed, almost tilting on two wheels, and Rosalind bit back a scream. “Do we have to drive so fast? You won’t achieve anything if you kill us both.”

“Full of advice, aren’t you?” he sneered, but he reduced the speed of the horses to a canter.

“At least tell me where we’re going.”

“Rye.”

“Rye?”

He grinned, his face full of excitement. “You, my dear, are going to France with me. Think of it—walking the avenues in Paris arm-in-arm.”

“I don’t want to go to Paris. I’m married to Lucien. Why would I leave with you?”

His good humor dissipated. “I’ll treat you well, better than Hastings ever will. I’ve seen the way he’s ignored you. He’s no better than a monster. Hell, he looks like a monster with that scar. I should have killed him when I had the chance.”

“What do you mean, when you had the chance?” Rosalind bit her bottom lip, wondering if he would grab the opportunity to boast. *Please tell me*. She hated the idea of touching him and attempting to read his thoughts again. “What did you do?”

“Rather clever of me, I thought. Our tutor and Charles were rushing about Naples trying to find Hastings. I pretended to go along with the search and fed them false leads.”

Rosalind frowned in true bewilderment. “I suppose it was you who organized the attack on Lucien and his wife. But why? Why did you try to kill him?”

“He has everything. It was always so easy for him.” His mouth twisted, a flash of avarice distorting his handsome features. “Hastings should have died that night. The idiots bungled the job.”

Anguish for the suffering Mansfield had caused Lucien tightened around her heart like a fist. “I don’t understand. There has to be more. Why do you hate Lucien so much? Why do you want him dead?”

“He contracted a betrothal with the woman I loved. Edwina swore she loved me, but she accepted his offer. After Hastings’s disappearance, she married a man three times her age. She’s suffering for her perfidy now.” His chuckle of amusement held pure spite. “Hastings has more luck than one man deserves, but he’ll suffer this time.”

Rosalind couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Jealousy? This was all about envy and hurt feelings? Because of a shallow woman? “Why are you so jealous of him?”

“I’m sick of your questions. Shut up or I’ll gag you.”

The lazy indulgence had faded from his voice, replaced by determination. He meant his threat. Rosalind closed her mouth and concentrated instead on a means of escape. Once again, she considered jumping from the moving chaise and she again rejected the idea. She’d have to wait until they reached a town or passed another carriage. All she’d need to do was scream for aid. She slid a glance at Mansfield. That was…unless he had a pistol?

A loud squeal rent the air. Rosalind’s head jerked up. A horse and cart approached from the opposite direction. A lone man walked behind the cart. It was heavily loaded with sacks of grain and the wheels squeaked a protest with each turn.

“Don’t,” Mansfield warned, frightening her with his grim resolution. “I’ll shoot the man if I have to.”

Part of her was shocked, but she shouldn’t have been after intercepting Mansfield’s writhing emotions. “You’d shoot an innocent man? For no reason at all?”

“I have a lot at stake. One more life won’t make any difference.”

Rosalind pressed her lips together, stricken suddenly with grief for Mary. No doubt Mansfield was involved in her death too. Her attempt to escape would wait until they arrived at their destination then. She didn’t want anyone else to die because of her actions.

They passed the cart, the driver bowing his head in greeting.

“Good girl,” Mansfield said. The team was breathing hard, their coats white with lather. He slowed them to a walk. “We’ll change horses in the next village. If we don’t hurry, we’ll miss tonight’s tide.”

Rosalind gave a clipped nod while she tried desperately to think of a means of escape. She refused to let her dream end this way, or let Lucien suffer because he thought he’d failed another wife.

Another carriage approached.

"Put my cloak on and cover your head," Mansfield ordered. "Do it. Now."

"Or you'll shoot the driver and passengers as well." Fury quivered in her voice and tense posture. "You can't shoot everyone, Mansfield."

"Put on the cloak." The words were like a whiplash.

He meant it. Rosalind reached for the black cloak and wrapped it around her shoulders. She jerked the hood over her head.

"Cover your face," he snapped.

Rosalind obeyed because she had no other option. Inwardly, she fumed. While she didn't understand the why, Mansfield was not going to get away with this. She knew Lucien would come for her, and she intended to do her bit. She was no helpless ninny.

The village of Whittlebury was larger than St. Clare. Rosalind had yet to visit the village, but Lady Augusta's friend Lady Pascoe lived hereabouts. Carriages, carts and a herd of cows filled the busy road. The chaise eased to a crawl, slow enough for her to leap off. Mansfield cracked the whip. The horses stirred restlessly as his hand whisked out to cover her knee, his fingers digging into her flesh.

"Don't even consider jumping. Move it," he roared at the cart driver in front.

The driver of the cart turned to spit on the ground. "Keep yer shirt on. Ain't goin' nowhere in a hurry."

Up ahead, Rosalind saw the problem. Market day. A cartload of fruit had overturned and blocked half of the road. Urchins snatched up red apples, darting in front of horses and vehicles with scant regard for safety. The driver shouted abuse and threatened bodily harm if they touched his produce. Everyone ignored him.

Rosalind edged away from Mansfield. With the number of people around, she might have a chance of escape. He wouldn't shoot her, not in front of witnesses.

"Hold." Mansfield grabbed her forearm with a force she knew would leave a bruise. "We'll walk from here."

"To Rye?"

"Don't be obtuse. Slide over to me. I'll get down and help you from this side of the chaise."

With hope of an escape stifled, Rosalind sought a way to stay in the crowd, where it was safer. “You can’t leave the horses here.”

Mansfield snapped his fingers at a passing urchin. “Boy, come here.”

The urchin froze, slid a look over his shoulder, and took half a step in Mansfield’s direction. Clear suspicion lined his grubby face.

“Do you want to earn a coin or not?” Mansfield demanded.

“Aye.” The urchin approached with a streetwise wariness that tore at Rosalind’s heart.

“Rosalind.” With command implicit in his voice, she knew she’d have to obey.

The chaise lurched when Mansfield jumped off, landing like her kitten, light on his feet. Expectation of her obedience showed in the confident tilt of his chin. Grudgingly, she slid across the seat to Mansfield. *Think*. Escape was imperative, but how?

“Quit stalling,” Mansfield snarled in a fierce undertone. “Don’t make me force the issue.”

She moved closer, unable to prevent a cringe when he seized her by the waist. He swept her off the chaise and dragged her close. Too close. His sandalwood scent enveloped her but, instead of enticing her as Lucien’s did, it made her stomach roil. Like Noir pouncing from behind a bush, his wicked intentions sprang into her mind. Rosalind’s gasp held shock. Distress. Numb, she tried to pull away, to break the contact between them, but his thoughts jumped in agitation. Pictures flickered through his mind so rapidly she had difficulty keeping up.

Bother. Questioning him had stirred his temper so much she felt as if she was adrift on rough seas, but one thing became crystal clear. Mansfield and Hawk were one and the same. She was in big trouble.

“Don’t fight me,” Mansfield murmured next to her ear.

“Whatcha want, mister?”

The images dissolved in her mind, the urchin’s interruption giving her breathing space. The man was mad. He…he…Words failed her. Of course, she’d seen like images of naked women in other men’s minds. Lustful thoughts, but to see *herself* naked brought a surge of fear.

Mansfield plucked a coin from his pocket. “Stay with my horses and take them to the King’s Head when the road is cleared. I’ll give you another coin when you get there.”

The urchin rubbed his sleeve across his runny nose, his gaze following the glint of the gold coin in Mansfield's hand. Finally, he nodded. Mansfield tossed the coin; the boy caught it, inspected it closely and clamped it between his teeth. Satisfied, he nodded again. "King's 'ead."

Mansfield dragged her against his chest. "As soon as you can." He smoothed a possessive hand over her head, keeping her close and under his control.

Rosalind forced back panic when another vision of her unclothed body appeared in his mind. Her mind slammed shut, but to no avail. As always, in times of stress, she was unable to block, and Mansfield's licentious thoughts pushed through the flimsy screen.

"You can't do this. I'm married to Lucien," she said, her shock spilling out into her words.

Mansfield's grip tightened on her upper arm. With one hand, he forced her head up so she had to look at him. "The rumors, are they true?"

Rosalind wrenched her gaze from his intense brown eyes. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Look at me."

Reluctant to look at him, she only followed his order after a long pause. His brown eyes held intelligence, cunning and a shrewdness that warned her to tread warily.

"Are you a witch?"

"Of course not." Scorn filled her retort.

His eyes narrowed and he smirked. The grin sent a shaft of alarm dancing down her spine, but she refused to look away. The vision slid into her mind with clandestine stealth, there before she knew it. A couple in bed. Naked. Before she even viewed the faces of the couple, all rational thought screamed to take care. *Do not react*.

"Why are we going to the King's Head?" She affected a casual air by thinking of a hot, sunny summer day—an excursion with Miranda and her cousin's friends to the river bordering her uncle's estate.

"This holdup has made us late. We'll miss the tide. The landlord at the King's Head is a friend. We will stay there overnight and resume our journey in the morning."

At least the delay gave her more time to escape. Once Mansfield had her aboard a ship, her chances of flight were nil.

Gray clouds skittered across the sky. A stiff breeze plucked at the black cloak Mansfield had insisted she wear. Rosalind shivered despite the warmth of the thick wool. It was late enough in the afternoon for people to remark on their disappearance. She imagined the gossip and Lucien's reaction to her absence.

An icy coldness gathered in the pit of her stomach. Lucien would believe in her innocence.

He had to.

Chapter Eighteen

Oberon trotted down the village street, lazily swishing his tail, while Lucien eyed the progress of the repairs. Much slower than he'd hoped. He slid from Oberon's back and, leading his mount, walked the length of the rutted road, studying the work still required. One of the builders rounded the corner of a run-down cottage awaiting refurbishment.

Lucien hailed him. "Thomas, what's the holdup?"

The man glanced at his scarred face and looked hastily away. "Supplier in the next village let us down. The load of timber never arrived."

"Has anyone checked with the supplier?" Lucien pretended he didn't notice the man's reaction.

Thomas shook his head. "We kept thinking the cart would arrive. I'll send someone now."

"I'll go," Lucien said. "Unless you need me here."

"There's nowt more to do until the timber arrives."

Lucien mounted up and let Oberon have his head. They sped along a narrow country lane, spooking a pheasant from the thicket. Oberon snorted and faltered, but Lucien urged him on, past the startled bird. The sky had darkened since he'd left the castle, the sun had faded, and now large drops of rain splattered the track. After a dry spell, they needed the rain but not now, when the roofing was still under way.

Lucien leaned his weight forward and patted Oberon's glossy black neck. "Let's make this a fast trip, boy."

Three-quarters of an hour later, after taking every shortcut he knew, they trotted down the main road of Whittlebury. Lucien frowned at the size of the mob thronging the streets. He knew it was market day on a Wednesday, but the crowds usually dispersed by midday. Carts laden with bales of straw and turnips jostled with carriages, men on horseback and pedestrians. A wooden cage full of roosters and hens on a handcart added to the din with their cackling and crowing. Traffic through the main thoroughfare had slowed to a crawl and tempers appeared frayed.

“Move along!” the driver of a dangerously overloaded cart hollered. His whip snaked out, arcing over his horses with a sharp whistle.

“’Ere! Watch where you’re cracking that whip,” another man roared.

The driver ignored the man, and his cart shot into a gap, the wheels squeaking in protest, while his load of straw teetered, perilously unstable.

Lucien urged Oberon onward.

“Look at ’is face,” a woman shouted to her companion.

The companion crossed herself and edged away from Lucien as if he suffered from the plague. “’Tis the mark of the devil.”

Lucien pretended he hadn’t heard, but the words stung nonetheless. They made him think of Rosalind and how protective she acted when people stared. She’d have taken the women to task for their rudeness. The strength of his need to see her, to steal a kiss and haul her into his bed again, took him by surprise. Impatient to complete his task, Lucien drew Oberon to a halt and dismounted, deciding to lead his horse. Progress along the packed street was slow and frustrating, so he ducked through the narrow lane that ran parallel to the main street.

That, too, was crammed with pedestrians. Oberon took exception to the crowd, tossing his head and dancing at Lucien’s side.

“Steady.” Lucien nodded at an elderly man who hobbled toward him with the aid of a stout stick. “What’s the problem? Why is the street blocked?”

“Cart o’turned. An’ some fancy nob left ’is ’orse an’ chaise and blocked the road. Right mess, it is.”

“How far down?” Lucien asked. “Do I need to keep on this lane or is the road clear now?”

“Should be clear now. Damn fool nob. Think they can do what they like.”

“Thank you, sir.” Lucien inclined his head in a sign of respect.

A rusty chuckle emerged. “I ain’t no sir, but I’ll take yer thanks right enough.” He bobbed his head and resumed his laborious journey, the tapping of his stick echoing in the lane as he departed.

Lucien turned back onto the main road and came to such a sudden halt Oberon nudged him in the back. The scar on his cheek tingled. That wasn’t just some fancy nob’s coach. That was the St. Clare chaise. What the devil was it doing in Whittlebury? And where the hell was Rosalind? Anxiety for his wife warred with fear. She was meant to be safe with Charles and

Mansfield, eating Lady Radford's famous cherry tarts and drinking lemon barley water. Where were Charles and Mansfield?

"Hold my horse." Lucien thrust the reins at a startled man and elbowed his way through the cheering crowd surrounding the chaise.

"'Ere, stop pushing. I got money on this 'ere fight." A man glared at Lucien but hastily turned away when he saw his scarred visage.

The advantage given by his height allowed Lucien to see the two urchins more clearly than most. It should have been an uneven match, with one much bigger than the other, but the smaller child appeared determined. Fists swung wildly. Feet kicked out. Elbows dug. Fingers gouged. The crowd cheered each landed blow, shouting encouragement to both boys.

"Get him, Jamie, boy! I have my money on you!" a woman shrieked.

"What's the fight about?" Lucien demanded of the man nearest him.

"They be fighting over taking the chaise to King's Head. Nob said he'd give the boy a gold coin."

"One man?" Lucien said, his tone sharp. That didn't make sense unless someone had stolen the chaise.

"Aye. Big, he was."

A sharp screech from the larger urchin claimed the man's attention. Lucien wanted to shake him and demand answers. He grabbed the man by the shoulder. "What did he look like?"

"Big, I said. A nob dressed in fancy clothes."

Lucien turned away in frustration to question a woman holding a small girl by the hand. The child took one look at his face and burst into noisy tears. Hell's teeth! Lucien aimed for a reassuring smile, but the child wailed even louder and buried her face in her mother's woolen skirts.

"Did you see the man who drove the chaise?" Lucien attempted to keep his building frustration from his voice, despite wanting to holler at the stupid people who judged by appearances. Damn it, he was more than a scar. He was a man. He battled for calm, inhaling deeply. "Please, ma'am. Did you see the man?"

The woman gave an abrupt shake of her head and stepped away, her face frozen in an expression of distaste.

In that moment, Lucien realized people at Castle St. Clare didn't react to his scar as much as when he'd first returned. Most of them treated him as the heir despite his surly moods and ruined face. He tucked the thought

away for later and resumed his questioning. Instinct suggested something was very wrong. He must find Rosalind.

"He was big," a bulky man said.

"Flashed 'is blunt around," another commented.

"What color was his hair?" Lucien asked, striving for patience.

"Black."

Hawk? Fear shot through Lucien.

"Nah! 'e wore wig."

An argument ensued when they couldn't agree. Lucien dragged in a slow breath. He didn't really care. All he wanted was his wife. *Rosalind*.

None of this was helping. "Which way is the King's Head?"

"It's the other side of the village. On the road to Rye," the man said. "Follow main road and take the second fork."

Before he could thank the man, he turned away. Lucien pushed his way back through the mass of bodies to collect his horse, using elbows, his greater bulk and his scar when necessary. Rosalind wouldn't approve. The notion brought a brief smile. "Thanks," he said, flipping a coin at the man.

The crowds thinned once Lucien moved away from the chaise, but the cheers and screeches of encouragement continued unabated. He swung up on Oberon and pressed his mount into a trot.

"Hastings!"

Lucien's head snapped about at the sound of his name.

Mansfield ambled toward him, threading through the crowd, a broad grin on his face. "What are you doing in Whittlebury?"

Lucien was positive Lady Augusta had said an outing near Castle St. Clare. He glanced past Mansfield, but none of the faces were familiar. Were the rest of the party in Whittlebury too? The trepidation inside eased a notch. "I came to check on supplies for the roof repairs. I thought you went on the excursion with Lady Sophia and her mother."

"Not me," Mansfield replied. "Lady Radford is far too managing. They say to look at the mother. If that's what Lady Sophia will be like, I'm staying far away." His eyes narrowed as he spotted something behind Lucien. "I say, is that the St. Clare chaise? What is it doing here? Was it stolen?"

Lucien dismounted again. "That's what I intend to find out. I'm on my way to the King's Head. The man who left it there paid an urchin to deliver it to the King's Head. Care to join me?"

“Why not? I have plenty of time before my evening engagement. I’m fair parched. Could do with an ale. The King’s Head’s ale will no doubt taste much like the brew at the Swan.” Mansfield fell into step with him. “Still riding that brute of a horse,” he said, his eyes sliding over Oberon with careful appraisal. “Are you sure you won’t sell him to me?”

Every time Mansfield saw him, he asked if Oberon was for sale. The discussion was an old, comfortable one, and Lucien felt the beginnings of a smile surface. “If my horse is a brute, why do you want him?”

“He has good lines,” Mansfield said. “I think he’d produce a good crop of foals.”

Lucien nodded, knowing it was nothing less than the truth.

Mansfield slowed. “You could at least let me ride him and put him through his paces. Next time I’m at Castle St. Clare.” He turned into a narrow lane. “This is a shortcut. It comes out behind the King’s Head.”

Mansfield stalked ahead, disappearing down the opening without looking back. A frown replaced Lucien’s good humor. The lane seemed dark. No telling who lurked down there. They weren’t in that much of a hurry. He hesitated, then shrugged and followed, leading Oberon behind. There were two of them, and no doubt Mansfield was armed.

Holding his nose, Lucien stepped over the swollen remains of a dead cat, his black boots sinking into soft mud. The stench made his eyes water. Oberon balked, planting his hooves firmly and refusing to move past the smelly corpse.

Lucien stepped up to his mount’s side and stroked his quivering neck. “No time for nerves, boy. I need to find Rosalind. She was in that chaise today. Something is wrong. I feel it in my gut.”

His soothing voice calmed the horse. Lucien grasped the reins firmly and stepped over the cat again. Oberon danced, rolling his eyes, but Lucien continued to speak in a low voice, and his mount finally consented to step over the ripe carcass.

Lucien turned his attention back to the dim-lit lane ahead. *The devil take it.* The lane was so dark Mansfield was no longer in sight. He slowed, his gaze sweeping the area in front. Oberon seemed to sense his apprehension. He snorted and pranced in nervous dancing steps, jerking the reins.

“Steady, boy.” Lucien stepped forward, his ears straining for the slightest sound. Instinct screamed to take caution because danger lurked ahead. “Mansfield?” His voice was soft, not much louder than a whisper.

Surely Mansfield wouldn't walk off and leave him, not if they intended to drink together.

The darkness of the alley lifted as they neared the end. Lucien squinted, scanning for danger. Nothing appeared untoward. Behind him, Oberon seemed calmer and the tension seeped from Lucien's shoulders. His mount had saved him more than once. When the bandits had attacked their party in France, it had been Oberon's warning that had alerted him and saved him from certain death. But not soon enough to save Francesca too. Sorrow pierced his heart when he thought of his first wife. She hadn't deserved to die so young, and for that Hawk would pay.

Lucien increased his pace, his thoughts switching to Rosalind. He refused to lose her too, not when he'd just found her.

He hurried down the remaining few feet of the alley. Several kegs were stacked at the door of the building opposite. No doubt Mansfield was already inside, ordering a tankard for each of them. Lucien stepped from the alley. A blur of movement to his right made his head jerk in that direction.

A dark figure swung at him with a club. His hand rose to block the blow. *Too slow.* Pain exploded in his head and he slumped to the ground.

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Rosalind paced the boundaries of her prison, ignoring the faint throb of her ankle. Luxurious as far as prisons went, with an elegant four-poster bed and a highly polished walnut dresser, but she was confined against her will.

She tried the door. Still locked. She marched to the single window overlooking the street below. It was a quiet back street used mainly by those who lived in the area. A stout, locked bolt barred her exit by way of the window. She considered breaking the glass and shouting for help but discarded the idea because Mansfield had warned her against the action. He'd said no one would help her. He'd told them she was queer in the head. They'd likely run if she shouted at them, and he'd had the audacity to grin when he said it. None of them would believe he was holding her against her will. Rosalind grimaced down at her skirt, ripped during a tussle for freedom. The hem bore a coating of dried mud. Her hair had toppled down during her attempt to escape and, without a comb or mirror, it was impossible to restore to its former neatness. Oh, yes. She looked like a madwoman.

The scrape of a key in the lock alerted her to a new arrival. Rosalind turned to the door, her heart pounding. Every muscle tensed as she prepared to seize any chance that came her way.

The door opened, and Mansfield stepped inside. Confidence and good cheer radiated from him. His grin stretched from one side of his face to the other, giving rise to a sinking feeling in her stomach.

Bad news for her.

Mansfield turned the key and slipped it inside his jacket. He faced her, his gaze wandering the length of her body before returning in a leisurely manner to her face. “Comfortable, my dear? Anything I can get you?”

Rosalind suppressed a shudder. The man looked at her as though she was a luscious piece of fruit tart. It made her very uncomfortable. “I would like to return to the castle.”

“Ah, but you don’t like living there. I’ve heard you tell that red-haired maid of yours.”

“It was you. You spied on me.”

Mansfield shrugged, clearly experiencing not a shred of guilt. “I watched over you, my dear. There’s a difference.”

Rosalind’s gaze narrowed at his smug tone. “Did you murder Mary?” She closed the distance between them with two steps, her hands fisted. If he said yes, she’d scratch his eyes out. The idea of her friend suffering at the hands of this madman infuriated her. “What did you do to Mary?”

His brows rose and he moved back. “Such an outpouring of emotion is unbecoming, my dear. Do control yourself.”

“I am not your ‘dear.’ Did you murder Mary?” Rosalind grabbed two handfuls of his embroidered waistcoat and yanked hard. Anger pounded through her veins and, for the first time in her life, she was tempted to injure rather than heal. “I knew she hadn’t run off with a lover. She wouldn’t leave without telling me. Did you kill her? Did you leave her in the tunnel?”

Mansfield wrenched away, took several steps back and paused to smooth his crumpled apparel. “It was her fault. She shouldn’t have tried to escape.”

“Why?” Fury vibrated through her body.

Mansfield held out his right hand to examine his fingernails. “I believe she objected to joining a harem.”

“You intended to sell her? To that sultan friend of yours in Constantinople?” Shock tore at her insides before rage whipped her upright. Mary in a harem. No wonder she’d tried to escape. She glanced at him and froze, suddenly uneasy with his intense scrutiny. “What do you intend doing with me?” she asked in a faint voice. Surely he didn’t intend to marry her, as he’d indicated earlier? She was married to Lucien.

“You in Abdul Musa’s harem?” He laughed with genuine amusement. “No, my dear. I don’t intend to present you to my old friend. I have other plans for you.” His gaze lingered on her lips and traveled across her breasts in a leisurely manner. The expression on his face did little to halt her escalating panic.

“I’d like to know.” A ripple of revulsion swept her body, and she fought the urge to hide behind the intricate Chinese screen in the corner of the room. Her chin shot up. “Tell me. *Please*.”

“I told you. We’re going to marry as soon as I’m sure you’re not bearing Hastings’s whelp. And in time, you’ll present me with an heir. Sooner rather than later, I hope.” His eyes glowed with a fanatical light. “Bedding you will be no hardship. Finally, I’ll get to touch your luscious breasts instead of merely looking. I’ll taste you. Rosalind, my dear, we’ll be good together.”

He’d watched her, seen her unclothed. She felt dirty and used, quite unlike the way Lucien made her feel. “I’m married to Lucien. I love him.” The words burst from her without thought, yet the minute she uttered them she knew she spoke the truth. She loved her husband. Now if only she had the chance to tell him.

Mansfield stiffened as if she’d struck him. Rage twisted his features into an ugly mask, and she immediately regretted her outburst. She edged away unobtrusively.

“None of this would have been necessary if you’d heeded the warnings I gave you of specters. You should have listened to your maid and left Castle St. Clare when you had the chance. She knew things weren’t right, that ghosts haunted your room. She saw me, you know, but instead of telling you, she confronted me. Ah, yes. I knew you’d be the key to my revenge.”

Oh, Mary. “You? You crept into my room from the passage behind the wall.”

“You were so brave,” he whispered, moving nearer to her. A flush suffused his face. His eyes glittered in a frightening manner. “No panic or

hysterics when your hairbrush disappeared and reappeared. Strange noises didn't spook you, and even when I crept into your room and shoved you from your bed, you didn't dose yourself with laudanum or descend into madness. You made me proud—a woman worthy of the St. Clare family, a woman worthy of being my mate. It didn't take me long to change my mind about you. I decided I'd keep you. You will be my wife. That other stupid bitch kept trying to kill you. She's lucky my plans escalated, or I'd have taken care of her myself."

Rosalind stared, shocked into silence by his revelations. She squeezed against the wall when he advanced on her, his face red, his eyes glittering with passion and a hint of madness. The man belonged in Bedlam.

"I'm afraid you sealed your fate when you entered Hastings's bed. Once I'm sure you're not bearing *his* child, you'll marry me. I'm the oldest. You were meant to marry me, not my brother."

"Brother?"

"Yes, brother." His response held a note of impatience. He paced a tight circuit of the chamber, mumbling under his breath before whirling to face her. "Hastings is my brother. Have you not noticed the similarities between us? Our features?"

Rosalind didn't have to pretend confusion. "I don't understand." She didn't understand at all.

"My mother had an affair with St. Clare before she married. I was an eight-month baby," he drawled.

Rosalind felt her mouth drop open in pure shock. "But you were heir to Mansfield."

"Bah!" Mansfield scowled. "The man was a wastrel. Mansfield gambled away the family fortune. All we have are debts." Hate burned in his eyes, strong enough for Rosalind to take a half step backward, her heart thudding with alarm. "I'm barely holding the estate together."

"So it's you! You're the one ransacking the castle for the treasure?"

Mansfield laughed, but the sound held little humor. "The St. Clare treasure is long gone. If it ever existed. Charles believes in chasing dreams. Me, I believe in reality." A heavy dose of sarcasm colored his voice. "Why would I bother to pursue myths when the St. Clare fortune is within my grasp? No, my dear. All I want is my due. St. Clare promised to marry my mother and reneged on the pledge. I want what's due to my family."

“But none of this is Lucien’s fault,” Rosalind burst out. “Why are you set on destroying him? Why not St. Clare?” Fear slithered through her when she saw the barely controlled rage on his face. How did he think he could right the wrongs of the past by committing more atrocities? An illegitimate child would never inherit.

He laughed, the devious, gloating sound scraping across her raw nerves. “St. Clare. He suffers each time I visit the castle, but he knows he can’t stop me. Why the hell do you think he wanted you to marry Lucien? He wants grandchildren, heirs in my way. Fool, as if he could stop me now. He knows I’m biding my time. But I intend to avenge the honor blackened by St. Clare. For once Hastings will finish second.” The light of madness grew in his brown eyes, a feverish need for revenge.

Rosalind tried to keep a healthy distance between them, but continued to push for answers to her burning questions. “Why did you have Lucien’s wife killed? His unborn child? They had nothing to do with St. Clare.”

“Ah, but you forget. Lucien was on his way home to England, and he was bringing a prospective heir. I never liked the way he disappeared in Naples. We left him for dead but no one recovered his body. I suspected he was still alive, so I paid a local man to watch, to listen and any information he learned he sent to me. While Hastings remained hidden in Italy with no knowledge of who he was, there was no danger to me. I kept tabs on him when I was in Constantinople, and later when I returned to England, content to bide my time. My claim on the St. Clare fortune is stronger than Charles’s.” His chuckle held pure evil. “It killed St. Clare knowing Lucien was dead and I, as his eldest son, could claim everything whenever I chose.”

“One flaw with your plan,” Rosalind said.

“Yes?” he drawled.

“Lucien is still alive.” Satisfaction oozed from her voice. In truth, Lucien’s presence was one of many flaws in his plans. Mansfield made everything sound easy, very black and white, but Rosalind clung to hope. Lucien would come for her. And meanwhile she would grasp any opportunity to escape.

A smug grin flickered across his face. “Oh, didn’t I tell you? I met Lucien about an hour ago. It seems he came to Whittlebury to check on building supplies that failed to arrive.”

“Lucien is here?” Hope surged inside Rosalind, until his superior expression dashed her optimism.

“Yes, I met up with Hastings earlier. I tricked him and knocked him unconscious, so if you’re counting on your husband racing to the rescue, you’re wasting your time.”

Fury lashed her. She launched at Mansfield and punched him. The first blow hit his stomach and the second snapped back his jaw. Rosalind prepared to strike for a third time but Mansfield captured her hand, his fingers a band around her wrist. Images poured into her head. A long narrow alley. Darkness. Mansfield hurrying ahead, hiding behind a corner and jumping Lucien.

“If you’ve hurt him, I’ll never forgive you.” She struggled against his hold, determined not to give in to his demands. If he thought she’d follow his orders blindly then he didn’t know her as well as he thought.

He subdued her by dragging her close to his body and surrounding her with iron-muscled strength. Rosalind stopped fighting, relaxed, and the instant he loosened his hold she stomped on his foot.

“Damn hellcat.” He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook until her head rattled. “I’m going to enjoy taming you.” His brown eyes narrowed and appeared assessing.

Rosalind tried desperately to block his licentious thoughts. They bombarded her like blows from a club—disgusting, despicable. Worst of all was the vision of her exchanging vows with him before a man of the cloth and offering her body to Mansfield. “No,” she cried. “You can’t make me marry you.”

“By God, the rumors are true. You can read minds. I believe you’ll be very useful to me in Paris, my dear.”

She would never help him. Never. And she’d never stop fighting him. She’d seize any opportunity to escape. “Where’s Lucien? What have you done with him?”

“He’s stashed in a safe place until I can have him removed.”

Until he killed him. She hadn’t told Lucien she loved him. Over and over the thought echoed through her head. “I suppose you recruited Lady Sophia too.”

Mansfield glowered at her. “I told you Lady Sophia works alone.”

The man spoke the truth about Lady Sophia and seemed irritated by the accusation. Obviously her assumption about them working together was a

mistaken one.

"Witch."

"*I am not a witch.*"

"Not you. Lady Sophia. I wondered why you didn't wear the clothes I left for you. She must have destroyed them. I knew she'd arranged to have you pushed over the cliff and of the stair incident. I would have stopped her if I'd known sooner. She always did have her eye on Hastings, but St. Clare wanted you for his precious son." Mansfield laughed suddenly. "I'm surprised Hastings's scarred face hasn't scared her off. The incentive of a title and position in society must mean more to her than perfection." At the striking of a clock, Mansfield pulled the chamber key from a pocket inside his jacket. "I'll arrange a tray. Eat well and get some sleep. We leave early in the morn."

Mansfield had left those gowns for her. Horrified, she stared at his back as he sauntered out the door. Remembering how excited she'd been when she'd found them, and how she'd felt wearing the luxurious gowns, made nausea sweep through her belly.

The door shut firmly behind him. The key turned in the lock, and she heard his receding footsteps. Rosalind rattled the doorknob anyway. She circled the room, searching for a means of escape, something she might have missed.

Finally, she flopped on the bed and stared out the window. Dusk had fallen. She heard the drunken revelry from the bar, the noise becoming increasingly louder as the evening progressed. Her stomach rumbled. Mansfield had said he'd send food. Perhaps she could overpower the person who delivered the tray. Lord, could she risk eating any food Mansfield provided? The thought gave her pause. She must keep her wits about her. She'd be no help to Lucien if a sleeping potion or the like incapacitated her.

Rosalind settled back to wait. Her eyes grew heavy, but she fought sleep. Twice, she almost nodded off. She concentrated on Lucien and prayed for his safety. Her lids lowered as she pictured him in her mind.

A heavy thump jerked her awake. At first, her thoughts were scattered, her mind sluggish and uncomprehending. The thud of footsteps sounded outside the door. Rosalind stiffened. She leaped off the bed, anticipation racing through her veins. This was it—a chance to escape. She ducked behind the Chinese screen and lurked out of sight. A weapon. She had

nothing to strike them over the head with. *Fool.* Wildly, she searched the room for a weapon. Anything. A poker. Bellows. A lamp. The chamber pot.

Frustration beat at her. It seemed as though Mansfield had ordered the removal of anything that might double as a weapon. Her shoulders slumped and she stepped into plain sight as the door opened.

An elderly lady waddled into the room. “Ho! Thinking of escape, was you?” Her face glowed a hot red and each breath came in a harsh pant, as if the climb up the stairs from the kitchens had taxed her strength.

Rosalind ignored the taunt. Despite the woman’s bulk and poor breathing, she still towered over her and looked far too strong for Rosalind to deal with and escape. She’d have to think of another way.

The woman glanced over her shoulder at the door. “What ya doing, dawdling out there, girl. I don’t have all night. Bring that there tray and be quick about it.”

A young girl staggered in carrying a laden tray. Her arms trembled under the weight, and it clattered when she dropped the tray on the walnut table standing beside the bed.

“You’ll pay for breakages, Annie. I be deducting them from yer wages. Just you remember that.”

The girl bobbed her head, keeping her eyes downcast. “Yes, mistress.”

The woman turned to fix small piggy eyes on Rosalind. “Put yer tray by the door when yer be finished. Annie will come to collect it. And don’t yer be trying nothin’ or I’ll make yer sorry. I be wise to witches. Girl, come along.”

Annie shot from the room like a rabbit frightened by a fox. The elderly woman glowered at Rosalind and stomped after the girl. The door slammed with a solid thunk followed immediately by the scratching of the key when it turned in the lock.

Rosalind stared at the stout door. A daring plan formed in her mind. That was it. Her means of escape. Probably her only means of escape, but she’d need to remain vigilant to make it work.

She surveyed the contents of the tray. Lumps of meat swam in a bowl of thin gruel. A crust of dry bread accompanied the stew. Rosalind picked up the bread knowing she needed her strength. It tasted as bad as it looked, and she dropped it back on the tray to wait for the return of the girl.

An hour passed, then another. Rosalind yawned and glanced at the bed but knew sleep was a luxury tonight. She stood and walked the length of the

room, determined not to slumber and miss her chance of escape.

Finally, she heard the key scrape inside the lock. She tensed and crept closer. The flutters inside her stomach intensified. This had to work. Once Mansfield had her on the ship to France, escape would be near to impossible. She didn't want to leave St. Clare or Lucien. Lucien—there was no telling what Mansfield would do with her husband before he killed him. Rosalind shuddered, knowing Lucien's death was inevitable if Mansfield wanted to succeed. She daren't fail.

The door creaked when it opened, and candlelight poured into Rosalind's room. Annie halted when she saw Rosalind.

"You were meant to put yer tray on the floor," she said accusingly. A frown puckered her brow.

"I forgot," Rosalind replied, infusing her voice with contrition. She sauntered over to the bed and sat on the edge, not far from the table where the tray sat. "I'm sorry."

Annie chewed on her bottom lip and stared at Rosalind in clear dismay. "Can…can you bring it here?"

"You want me to carry the tray over to you?" Rosalind tensed inside, ready to spring at the girl the minute she came close enough.

Annie blinked. Even in the dim light, Rosalind saw the desperation in the girl's pale green eyes. Annie licked her abused lip, looking from the tray to Rosalind. It was clear she didn't want to leave without the tray and risk the old woman's wrath.

"Please, miss."

Rosalind felt a flash of guilt. The old woman would likely beat the girl if she returned empty handed. Then Rosalind thought about Mansfield and what he intended to do to them all. She hardened her heart. "Come in and get it," she said, waving a languid hand at the barely touched dishes. "I won't hurt you."

The girl's eyes rounded. She edged a few inches inside the door, but looked ready to bolt at any sudden move on Rosalind's part. Rosalind scarcely breathed, watching Annie closely even though she pretended disinterest in the tray and the girl's presence.

"Be it true yer a witch?" Annie blurted.

Ah, gossip. Rosalind thought rapidly and came to a quick decision. *What do you want from a witch, Annie?* One thing came to mind. Rosalind wanted to smile with triumph but inclined her head slowly so she didn't

frighten the girl. Finally, gossip might help instead of bringing heartache. The tittle-tattle might help save Lucien. “Yes, I’m a witch.” She watched the girl closely, measuring her reaction.

Annie glanced over her shoulder in a furtive manner. Both uneasiness and desperation slid across her face when she turned her attention back to Rosalind. “Do you do potions?”

“What did you have in mind?” A man was involved here, and unrequited love. Rosalind bit back a satisfied smile, reassured by her initial deduction. Her plan would work. She’d make it work.

After another quick glance over her shoulder, Annie took a deep, shuddering breath and seemed to come to a decision. She crossed the threshold, closing the door behind her, her apprehension regarding Rosalind overtaken by the need for love. “A love potion. I need a love potion.” Her blurted words confirmed Rosalind’s guess.

She pretended to consider the request before saying, “There’ll be a price.”

Annie crept toward the dirty dishes, nearly going cross-eyed as she kept one eye on Rosalind and the other on the door. “I’ve saved some coins. How much do you charge?”

One loud *boo* and the girl would take off like a startled hare. Rosalind quashed the guilt inside and forged ahead. “No money.”

“But you said there’d be a price.” Like a dog whose master beat it, Annie cowered, poised to run. Scrawny hands quivered at her sides. Her gaze skittered over Rosalind without settling. She bit her bottom lip again in clear indecision. “I can’t let you go. She’ll beat me.”

Not if Rosalind had anything to do with it, but she couldn’t make the promise and be sure she could keep it. Without warning, she leaped from the bed and seized the girl by the forearm, holding her easily. Apart from emitting a small squeak, she didn’t cry out. She stood stiff and trembling, tears filling her eyes. Rosalind experienced the full spectrum of her distress. Annie’s frantic thoughts and fears slid stealthily into her mind. Guilt bloomed afresh, and Rosalind made a silent vow to come to the girl’s aid once life settled. But for now, she’d have to take advantage of her in the same way everyone else did. Annie was her only means of escape.

“Don’t hurt me. Don’t put a spell on me.” The girl shivered so much Rosalind felt like a bully. The stream of panicked thoughts coming from her didn’t help.

“If you let me go, I’ll help you,” Rosalind said. She pushed Annie down on the bed and stood over her.

Annie shook her head from side to side, her wide panicked eyes stirring Rosalind’s guilt anew. “She’ll kill me.”

Rosalind grabbed for the large key but the girl refused to yield it. “If you don’t give me the key, I’ll make warts grow on your nose, your mouth, and your hands. Your sweetheart won’t want you. You’ll be ugly. No one will want you.”

Tears streamed down the girl’s face.

“I’ll turn William Harrow into a frog,” Rosalind warned the terrified girl. “Give me the key. You don’t want William to suffer, do you? You wouldn’t want him to know he suffered misfortune because of you.”

Annie’s terrified gasp filled the room. She cowered even farther away, her panic clear. She swallowed, finally finding her voice. “How did ye know his name?”

“I’m a witch,” Rosalind muttered, glancing at the door. This was taking too long. Mansfield might arrive at any moment, or the old woman, and then she’d lose everything.

Rosalind sprang suddenly, grabbed the girl’s hand and pried the key loose. She winced at the flash of pain in her ankle, but forced her discomfort aside. Escape was imperative. She wouldn’t get another chance. With the key in her possession, she crept to the door and slid it open to peer into the passage outside. When she saw there was no one to witness her escape, she slipped out as quick and fluid as morning mist. She locked the door and pocketed the key. Deep sobs penetrated the barrier, and Rosalind knew the pitiful sound would haunt her in weeks to come.

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The moon shone through the window high above him, the light hitting him in the face. Lucien’s eyelids flickered before he jammed them shut. Pain, sharp and intense, knifed through his head, the moon’s glow aggravating the steady throb. He heard a groan. His groan. Nausea rocked his gut, yet his mind impelled him to move.

Lucien lurched to his feet, and a moan squeezed past his clenched teeth. There wasn’t any part of his body that didn’t hurt. He sucked in a slow,

cautious breath. Then another. One thought crystallized in his hazy mind and stuck there.

Rosalind. Where the hell was she?

He gripped a sturdy pillar for balance while he took stock of his surroundings. Despite the limited light, he noted the old wooden casks in various states of repair stacked beneath the lone window. A scuttle of feet told him he had rats or mice for company. He let go of the pillar and wobbled, unsteady for an instant, before righting himself with the help of a wall.

Dust rose with each move he made, tickling his nose and teasing a sneeze loose. The sound reverberated in the cavernous prison, sending renewed pain surging through his aching head. He frowned, having no idea of his location. He listened carefully, trying to fix his locality. Apart from the steady drip of water and the rustle of rodents, he heard nothing to aid him. Presumably the casks indicated the King's Head. Odd that he couldn't hear the drunken gaiety of patrons. He fumbled his way along the wall, searching for a door. He blundered into a cobweb and sneezed twice before he located the exit.

"Rosalind," he whispered, picturing her blond beauty in his mind's eye. He'd give almost anything to hold her right this moment. He had to find his English mouse.

He thought back, examining his memory for clues. He'd led Oberon through the lane, despite his misgivings. Someone had struck him when he'd exited onto the main thoroughfare. He hoped Oberon was safe. Had Mansfield hit him? Lucien scowled, trying to make sense of his jumbled thoughts. No, the other man had gone ahead to order the drinks. Lucien discarded the idea of treachery, but his mind kept circling back to the idea. If the motive was robbery, he'd still be lying in the lane. His incarceration in this dark hole made things appear more sinister than mere robbery.

One hand reached up to investigate the knot at the back of his head. Blood came away on his fingers. His father always said St. Clares had hard heads, and several pub brawls when he was younger had proved it. Lucien's teeth clamped together as he rode another wave of pain. What the hell had Mansfield hit him with?

Mansfield.

His father…

Lucien froze. A hazy memory surfaced, shimmering through his throbbing brain. As usual, he tried to seize the fleeting thought before it disappeared. Instead of escaping, the memory solidified as he eagerly grasped it.

Lucien concentrated as another emerged.

And another.

Memories poured into his mind like after-dinner port splashed into a glass. It was as if a barrier in his mind had broken, allowing the memories to flow free.

He remembered his past.

All of it.

Lucien stumbled against the door and attempted to open it. He stepped back and ran at the door with his shoulder. A sharp throb of pain burned the length of his arm. Cold pierced his damp jacket and breeches, pebbling goose bumps over his limbs. But elation surged as memories piled one on top of the other. One particular memory hit him hard.

Betrayal.

A friend's betrayal.

Mansfield's betrayal.

Lucien recalled the night in Naples. He remembered his friend walking up to him in the deserted street in the early hours of the morning.

"Mansfield." Lucien swayed, worse for local wine. His shirt and jacket reeked of the woman's cheap perfume and sex, but he felt loose and limber after the spectacular ride she'd given him. "Thought you went back to our rooms." Damn, he wished Mansfield would stand still. His friend kept splitting into two men. Two friends angry with him wouldn't do at all. "Sorry 'bout 'fore," he slurred.

"Couldn't sleep," Mansfield muttered, ignoring the apology.

"I'm gonna win our bet." Lucien's small step turned into a stagger, but he righted himself before he hit the ground. "Whoa! Ground's moving. Tonight was number ten."

"I don't care about our stupid bet. You're drunk," Mansfield sneered, glancing past Lucien instead of looking him straight in the eye. "Think I can forgive your insults to my mother? To me? I am the rightful St. Clare heir and, by damn, I'm going to claim my place. You might have won Edwina, but I'm not having you steal my birthright too."

Befuddled, Lucien stared at his enraged friend. Brother? Was it true? If so, he'd never suspected a thing. A foreign sound drew Lucien's attention. He spun around. Three men with clubs and knives stood behind him.

"Robbers! Draw your pistol!" Lucien cried to Mansfield. He darted a quick glance at Mansfield and blinked. His friend stood unmoving, his expression disinterested.

The first blow caught him on the shoulder, numbing his right arm. His pistol dropped to the ground. A knife flashed out, slicing the length of his face. Blood gushed from the wound, shrouding his sight.

"Make it look like a robbery," Mansfield instructed tersely. "But make sure he dies."

Lucien was dimly aware of Mansfield leaving.

"There be someone coming," one man warned.

They dragged him to a dark alley, kicking and beating him savagely until he lost consciousness.

Lucien shook himself from the black fog of the past. He'd been drunk. Vulnerable.

Mansfield had acted as decoy while his paid men had come up behind him with knives and bludgeons, striking him repeatedly, leaving him for dead. By God, Mansfield had abused his trust and now he'd captured him again. But Rosalind—did Mansfield have her? Worry filled him at the thought of her in Mansfield's clutches. He'd endangered Rosalind by marrying and bedding her. The possibility of an heir between Mansfield and the title had pushed him over the edge. And where was Charles? Was his cousin part of the scheming?

Fury propelled him away from the wall. Lucien stalked the boundaries of his confines, ignoring the dull ache in his head as he searched for a way out.

He stumbled over a barrel. With his mind functioning more clearly, he smelled the stale scent of dried hops, of beer. An unused cellar. But where, if not the King's Head? And how the devil was he going to get out? He paused, listening carefully for a noise, any sound to alert him to the presence of another.

He heard nothing apart from the rustling of rodents. Frustration grabbed him. He tested the door with his shoulder for the second time. Although old, it was stout and built to last.

Lucien sank to the floor, his back resting against the cold wall. He'd have to wait until someone came, then overpower them. It was his only hope.

Chapter Nineteen

Shouts and cheers from the public rooms increased in intensity as Rosalind crept down the stairs. The stench of smoke and beer, boiled cabbage and unwashed bodies assaulted her nostrils. Raucous laughter spilled through a partially ajar door, masking the creak of the wooden stairs under her feet. She caught flashes of movement and faces—a barmaid carrying tankards, a group of rough laborers, two well-dressed men. Mansfield was probably inside the taproom, so she hurriedly continued down the last two stairs instead of gawking.

Fear of discovery made her heart pound and her limbs tremble, but she forced herself to speed. There would be only one chance. She mustn't falter.

The door leading to the taproom burst fully open and a couple staggered out. The man kicked the door shut and the couple fell against the wall. His hands swept under his partner's full frothy skirts, displaying white thighs to Rosalind's incredulous eyes. As she watched, the man fumbled with his trousers. She pressed a hand to her mouth to hold back her cry of shock. They were going to do it right in front of her.

At least the door leading to the tavern was shut now. The couple was engrossed in each other. Surely escape was but a few steps away, as long as they didn't see her. Rosalind ducked her head, letting locks of hair fall across her face. She scuttled past the couple, trying to ignore the animal grunts of lust.

Rosalind tugged at the side door to the small street off the main thoroughfare. Her hand, moist and sweaty, skidded across the latch. Her teeth clamped down on her lip as she glanced over her shoulder. She wiped her palms across her skirts, took a deep breath and tried again. This time the latch slid smoothly under her grasp. She opened the door and slipped through, closing it with a snap.

After scanning for danger, Rosalind shot away from the King's Head. Somewhere to hide. A plan. Quickly, before Mansfield discovered she'd escaped. She ran, lifting her skirts so she didn't trip.

Once clear of the King's Head, she ducked into a narrow alley. Her chest heaved as she gasped for breath.

Lucien.

Good grief. She wasn't thinking too clearly. Mansfield had probably incarcerated Lucien at the King's Head too, if he hadn't killed him already. *Fool*. She'd have to go back and search for him.

Or find someone who knew of his location. The thought slid into her mind. She swallowed. She'd have to use her gift again, perhaps intimidate another person with stories of witchcraft.

Rumors would fly about St. Clare, and now Whittlebury, like mythical witches on broomsticks. People would point and jeer, if they didn't try to burn her first. All hope of a normal life with Lucien seemed far away. Saving Lucien would effectively spell doom for her hopes of a secure future. Rosalind dithered, trying to decide on a course of action—help Lucien or seek aid from someone else. It was so late she had no idea who to turn to for help.

"Hello, dearie." A filthy hand grasped her arm while another pinched her bottom. "Fancy company?"

Rosalind started. Panic pumped through her veins before she regained control. She straightened and glared down her nose at the leering men. "Let me go." *Act like a weakling and you become weak*.

"Hoity-toity! Too good for a tumble with us."

Rosalind scowled. "Do you know who I am?"

As she spoke, she opened her mind, letting one of the men's thoughts wash through her. For the second time today she embraced her gift and shoved away the consequences. Too bad if people discovered her differences. Lucien's life depended on her finding help. She loved him and could never live with the knowledge she hadn't tried her best to save him.

Aha! "Prudence won't mind?" she asked, quirking one eyebrow at the man holding her captive.

The man jerked from her touch. Even in the dim light, she saw his face pale. But his friend laughed.

"What are you laughing about?" Rosalind glowered at the other man who still groped her backside with one wandering hand. "Your woman will cut your balls off if she catches you with your hands on another."

The man removed his hands so quickly, Rosalind fell against the cold mud walls of a building. She'd only repeated his thoughts, but her cheeks

felt fiery hot because of the coarse language she'd used.

"Yer a witch," he snarled, but his strong tone conflicted with his stance. Shock showed clearly on his round face.

Intimidate. Yes. Rosalind stalked the closest man. Twice as wide and a foot taller, he backed away as if plague pustules covered her face. She suppressed a grin as heady power rushed through her, lending strength and resolve.

Both men cringed. "Don't put no spells on us. We won't tell anyone we seen you," the bum fondler pleaded.

What he meant was he valued his home comforts. He didn't want his woman to discover his roving eye. "The King's Head. Tell me about the public house. Where are the cellars? Below or out the back of the building?" Rosalind eyed the men expectantly. When they stared at her in mute silence, she took one threatening step toward them. "Who runs the public house?"

"Digby," the hulk blurted. "The building be old. Two buildings joined together."

"Cellars?" Rosalind demanded.

"Rooms out the back."

"There be cellars below," the fondler added.

Rosalind nodded. The men backed from the alley. "Is there a cellar man or does Digby look after his own cellars?"

The men edged away until she could see only the one dark silhouette.

"Digby." The man's voice shook, but Rosalind wasn't sure if it was her or Digby the men feared most. She wanted to demand more answers but the echoing thud of footsteps told her the cowards were fleeing. She made a click of disgust at the back of her throat. Two men twice her size, intimidated by her. Fancy that.

Rosalind exited the far end of the lane and scanned the road. Light spilled from the King's Head, and customers overflowed from inside onto the street. Her light-colored gown stood out like a beacon. Wind whistled down the road, tearing her hair, plucking at her skirt. She yanked her hair away from her face and melted into the shadows of the buildings. A baker. A drapery. A blacksmith's forge. The King's Head took up the rest of the street.

When Rosalind reached the smithy, she turned down the alley running between it and the drapery. A stench made her nostrils flare. The farther she

crept into the alley, the worse the smell became. Her eyes watered. Her stomach flipped in protest, but Rosalind kept moving. She needed to find a rear entrance to the public house before Mansfield discovered her absence.

The overhang from the roof obliterated every scrap of illumination. Rosalind heard a disgusting squelch coming from beneath her shoes. Swallowing her rising bile, she hastened her pace. Cautious steps sounded behind her, ratcheting up both fear and her vivid imagination. Rosalind ran. Her gown caught on something sharp. She yanked. The rip of fabric sounded before she wrenched free. Rosalind burst from the alley, her breaths coming in wheezy pants.

"Who's there?" A man's voice, low and husky, did nothing to slow her galloping heart.

She froze, trying to decide if he was friend or foe.

A dog's growl sounded, mean and threatening.

"Don't let him hurt me," Rosalind begged. "Someone's chasing me."

"Show yerself." The blunt voice sounded as frightening as the dog's warning rumble.

Rosalind clutched her skirts and crept into the light. Off to her right, a huge man restrained a black dog by its collar. His large biceps and muscular shoulders told her she'd run into the blacksmith. But friend or foe? She halted close enough for him to see her, but far enough away for her to attempt to run if he meant harm.

"Sit," he ordered the dog.

The dog sat, but didn't take its eyes off Rosalind. Neither did the blacksmith.

"Lass, what are you doing out at this time of night? 'Tis not safe. A wee bit of a thing like you. The men from the King's Head will eat you for dinner and spit out yer bones."

Rosalind eyed him cautiously. "I think my husband is imprisoned at the King's Head." Tense, she studied his reaction. If he showed the slightest malice, she'd make a run for it.

He scratched at his sparse gray hair. "Aye. Strange goin' on there. I try to stay out of it, mind, but a man gets curious."

Rosalind edged closer. "Could you tell me where they'd keep a man imprisoned?"

"Cellars out back." He nudged his head to the right. "Along there. Maybe upstairs."

“Thank you.” Rosalind edged past the dog, heading toward the public house.

“I know you,” the smithy said. “You be the witch from St. Clare.”

“I’m not a witch,” Rosalind protested weakly. Lady Sophia and her malicious gossip had spread rumors faster and farther than Rosalind liked.

The man eyed her closely. “You have healing powers.”

Rosalind acquiesced with a bob of her head.

“Aye.” He nodded as if pleased he’d recognized her. “Thought as much. You be the one who saved my sister’s child when she ate poison berries. Thought she’d die, we did. Right grateful we are. I’ll come with you.”

The man looked like a mountain. He’d attract attention she could ill afford. Still, she was touched at his offer. “Thank you, but I’ll be fine.”

He hesitated. “If yer sure. Tell you what. If you need aid, summon me. There be plenty urchins about keen to earn coin.”

At last a man who wasn’t terrified of her gift. “Thank you. I’ll do that.”

She left the smithy and tiptoed through the shadows. Light glowed from the public house, spreading out and dispersing the shadows so there was nowhere to hide. With her luck, someone would appear the moment she left hiding. Still, she couldn’t hover here till morning because they’d notice her absence by then.

For long seconds, she dithered. Then she took a deep breath and ran to the door at the rear of the public house, climbing the two steps that led into a porch. She grasped the handle and tugged. It was locked. Cocking her head, she listened, her ear close to the door. It sounded as though this entrance led directly into the main taproom. They’d hardly stash Lucien there. Frowning, Rosalind slid from the shelter of the porch and glanced farther along the building. A small, dilapidated structure, attached to the main part, caught her attention. The door looked almost new. Rosalind glanced both left and right, running across to investigate.

“Lucien,” she called in a low undertone. She gave the door a tentative knock with the back of her hand. “Are you in there?”

“Rosalind?” Shock and disbelief coated his voice.

He was there! Relief made tears well in her eyes. She opened her mouth to speak, but he spoke first.

“What the devil are you doing here?”

Rosalind’s eyes narrowed. He might be her husband, but he was also an ungrateful lout.

“Rosalind, are you there?”

“Of course I’m here.” After she freed her husband, she’d smack him over the head with a sharp object. That would knock sense into his addled brain. “I’m going to get you out. Do you know where the key is?”

“Listen. Leave me. Go and find help. Summon Charles, no, not him—the magistrate, but whatever you do, keep away from Mansfield. He’s dangerous.”

“I know he’s dangerous,” Rosalind snapped. “He kidnapped me. The man’s not only dangerous, he’s deranged and a smuggler. He murdered Mary. He’s the one you’ve been searching for. Mansfield is Hawk.”

“Hawk? *The bastard.* Rosalind!” Lucien roared. His voice carried a distinct edge this time. “For once in your life, do as you’re told. Go and summon help.”

Rosalind sighed. Unfortunately, without the key, she wouldn’t have a chance of setting him free. The door was made of strong English oak. “All right.” She’d go for help but intended to return.

She ran back in the direction she’d come from, uncaring if she was seen. Help was closer to hand than Charles. It was time to call in that favor after all.

It sounded as though she made a lot of noise as she raced to the smithy. Yet no one challenged her. A light shone from beneath the closed rear door of the blacksmith’s premises. Her fists pummeled the door. “Smithy!”

“’Old yer horses. I’m coming. Aye,” the giant man said, his voice a low rumble as he unlocked the door. “It’s you.”

Rosalind met his fearsome gaze without a flinch. “I’ve found my husband. Please, I need your help.”

The man stepped back inside. Rosalind’s jaw sagged. He wasn’t going to help? But then he returned, a rifle in his hands. Rosalind stared at the menacing weapon and opened her mouth to protest.

“Where is he? The cellar?”

Rosalind snapped her mouth shut. He was right. A weapon might prove necessary. She nodded. “Yes, if the small building to the side of the King’s Head is the cellar.”

“Stay here,” the smithy ordered, stuffing the gun out of sight beneath his grubby coat.

Her chin shot up. She was not staying put. And she was sick of men telling her they’d take care of her. She stepped forward and halted when the

smithy gazed at her. Finally, she nodded. “He’s in the room over there. The door’s locked.” She’d wait just inside the door until he left.

Unhurried and heavy footsteps sounded. Rosalind strained to hear, her heart thumping against her ribs. When she could no longer hear his footsteps, she slipped from the smithy’s premises and followed.

At the corner of the public house, she paused. The smithy was at the door and, judging by the sounds, he was trying to break the lock. She sidled closer, but just as she was about to announce her presence, a man exited the rear door of the public house. Tall and familiar.

Mansfield.

Rosalind pressed against the wall in an effort to hide. When he rounded the small porch, he’d see the smithy at the locked door. Mansfield paused, glancing over his shoulder. Fear blossomed inside Rosalind. If he saw her or the smithy, the escape attempt would be over before it started, and she’d end up in France before they discovered her missing. Everyone at St. Clare would assume she and Lucien were together. The cowardly part of her wanted to close her eyes and pretend none of this was happening. Except, if she did that, Mansfield would grab her before she could escape.

While she dithered over what to do, Mansfield ambled down the steps, continuing on his way and passing her. Do something! her mind screamed.

“My lord! The woman’s escaped.”

Rosalind whirled around. It was the overweight woman who’d come to her room with dinner. Where the devil had she come from? Rosalind tried to blend into the shadows, making herself small and unobtrusive.

Mansfield’s savage curse colored the air.

“There she is!” the woman cried.

“Where?” Mansfield demanded, his voice curt.

“Over there.”

Rosalind bounded away like a startled rabbit. No longer sticking to the shadows, she hoisted her skirt and sprinted to the smithy’s forge, away from Lucien. Hopefully, Mansfield would give chase.

“Rosalind, sweetheart. Don’t run. You won’t get away.” Amusement filled Mansfield’s voice, inciting anger in her. Rosalind, sweetheart, indeed!

The fat woman’s screeches receded, and all Rosalind could hear were her own ragged pants.

Footsteps thundered behind her. Rosalind glanced over her shoulder, panicking now because Mansfield’s longer legs made a mockery of the

race. He splashed through puddles, his footsteps sounding louder and louder. She shot another glance over her shoulder. Mansfield was much closer than she'd thought. He'd almost caught her.

Rosalind's legs trembled. Her ankle throbbed. Blood roared through her head. Then she stumbled in a rut on the road, and Mansfield seized her. He grabbed her shoulder and hauled her around. An elaborate wig covered his head, snowy white with fresh powder. His silk frockcoat glinted in the soft light pouring from an open window above them. Raucous laughter and loud voices floated down to her. A private dining room, she decided. None of the occupants would be interested in the drama unfolding below.

His breathing had barely changed, but his eyes glowed from the thrill of the chase. He grinned crookedly. "You're not going to do this the easy way, are you, sweetheart?"

"I am *not* your sweetheart." Her chest heaved as she gasped for air. Noting his masculine interest, she folded her arms. "Don't look at me like that."

His grin never wavered, and it was his confidence that sent a sliver of fear racing down her spine. "You're mine." He trailed one finger down her cheek. "Perhaps I should have pushed the matter earlier. So you'd believe it as much as me."

Rosalind swallowed the bloom of panic. Where was Lucien? The smithy? Help would arrive soon. All she needed to do was prevaricate and delay Mansfield. Between them, they would outsmart Mansfield and quash his tentacle-like hold on the St. Clare family and village. "I'm not, and will never be, yours."

Temper clouded his face, and he shook her.

"Poaching, Mansfield?" Lucien stepped from the shadows. "That always was your style. You always were a spoilt child wanting the toys Charles and I had. I see nothing has changed."

"Damn it! How did you escape? Never mind." He pulled a pistol from beneath his coat, aiming it at Lucien. "Rosalind, behind me, if you please."

She didn't please at all. Her chin lifted in defiance. He'd have to shoot her first, and she didn't think he'd do that. The smithy had managed to free Lucien. She scanned the area but couldn't see the man. Had he gone for help?

"Rosalind." Both men spoke at once. Lucien brooked no refusal. Mansfield's voice held sharpness and a trace of something suspiciously like

panic.

He hadn’t expected her to gainsay him. Good. She glanced at Lucien, silently seeking direction. His face appeared drawn. Pale. Dried blood smeared one side of his face, giving him a grotesque look. Concern for her husband creased her brow.

“Rosalind, stand aside now or I’ll shoot.” Mansfield gestured at Lucien with the gun, and she understood the silent threat. He intended to shoot Lucien, not her.

“I didn’t think shooting was your style either,” Lucien drawled. “In my experience, you prefer skulking in the shadows. The secretive and cowardly approach, or you pay someone else to do your dirty work.”

“Shut up.” Although his voice barely rose, Mansfield’s face darkened with anger. “If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t have to work in the darkness. Move, over there where I can see you. Don’t give me an excuse to shoot. I’m happy to make Rosalind a widow.”

He was going to kill Lucien this time, no matter what he said to the contrary. The determined look on his face told her the truth.

Rosalind glanced at Lucien again, but his gaze remained fixed on Mansfield. Frustration made her jaw tighten. She was capable of helping. Why didn’t Lucien do something?

Mansfield made a small sound of impatience. “Rosalind, for the last time, move. Now.”

Oh, good idea. She edged behind Mansfield so she was out of his sight.

“Rosalind, I want you where I can see you.” He never took his gaze from Lucien. “Rosalind?”

Rosalind leaped on Mansfield’s back, clinging like holly on the North Tower. Her hands seized the back of his wig. She twisted it roughly so the powder sprayed in all directions and the hair hung in his face, obscuring his vision. Mansfield’s elbow jerked upward, catching her a glancing blow on the side of the head. She saw stars and slid from his back.

A gun discharged. The acrid smell of gunpowder filled the air. A hand fisted in her hair, tugging painfully hard.

“Get up now.” Mansfield’s voice held fury, no longer the charming rogue.

It felt as if he were ripping her hair out by the roots. Tears smarted at her eyes. Waves of agony pounded through her head. A groan sounded, then

she heard the explosive crunch of a fist smacking against bone. The firm grip on her hair loosened, bringing with it pained relief.

Rosalind wiped the back of her hand over her eyes and looked up. Lucien and Mansfield were trading punch for punch. What had happened to the smithy? Had Lucien sent him for help?

Lucien caught Mansfield with a heavy blow to the jaw. He stepped back and almost fell over her. She crawled out of range.

The smithy wasn't present, but the fat woman from the inn had stayed to watch. The woman crept up behind Lucien with a heavy earthenware urn in her hands.

"Oh, no, you don't." Scrambling to her feet, Rosalind rushed the woman, screeching at the top of her lungs. Lucien was depending on her. He couldn't handle both Mansfield and the woman at the same time.

She charged, her head butting the soft roundness of the woman's stomach, throwing herself at her even though she was half the size. The air bled from the woman in a hoarse gasp. Rosalind struck out with her elbows, using them like weapons.

"I'll get you, little bitch," the woman howled. She raised her hands above her head and smashed the urn down, aiming for Rosalind. The woman stumbled and a rush of air whistled past Rosalind's ear.

"Rosalind!" Urgency filled Lucien's voice.

Rosalind heard a thud. A groan. A fist whizzed past her face. The fat woman staggered and dropped to the ground with an earth-shaking crash.

"Rosalind?" Impatient hands grabbed her, clutched her roughly and smoothed her hair from her face. "Are you all right? Where do you hurt? God, I told you to leave this to me. I'd wish you'd listen for once in your life!"

Her head hurt, her scalp smarted, and her ankle ached like the devil. Rosalind's lips curled up in a lazy grin. "Good to see you too."

A blur of movement behind Lucien caught her attention. "Behind you!"

A gunshot sounded. Blood bloomed on Lucien's shirtsleeve. Rosalind screamed.

"My game, I believe." Mansfield swayed behind Lucien, a smoking pistol in his right hand. Triumph blazed from his face. "My woman."

He shoved Lucien away like pig swill and held out a hand to her. "Come, my dear. It is time for us to leave for Rye. The boat awaits. We'll leave now and board early, ready for departure at full tide."

“I think not, Mansfield. I believe I hold the winning card.” Lucien indicated the group of men behind him, led by the smithy. “You can’t shoot all of them.”

“God, I should have had you killed in France,” Mansfield snarled. “They were meant to leave you for dead. You have the luck of the devil—more lives than a damn cat.”

Lucien’s face blanked of expression, and Rosalind bled inside for him. She knew how much he’d loved his wife.

“Why didn’t you? You killed my wife. My child.”

“I wanted you to suffer like I’d suffered when the woman I loved pledged to you. Besides, you had no idea who you were. I thought you’d wander around France or return to Italy. If I’d known you’d travel to St. Clare, I’d have shot you myself.”

“Maybe you should have done a better job in Italy, then you would have been rid of me once and for all.”

Rosalind gasped. Both men were talking as if…Her gaze shot to Lucien’s face. He’d regained his memory! She was pleased for him. No matter how it might change her future, at least Lucien was past the struggle with his memory and the frustration of groping with the unknown.

“What do you want done with him, my lord?” The smithy approached Mansfield with wary respect.

“Tie him up and lock him in the cellar. The woman too. We’ll send them to the authorities once it’s light.”

After a brief struggle, the smithy restrained Mansfield. Lucien watched as they shoved him roughly inside the cellar. Two of the men lifted the woman to her feet and dragged her, kicking and screaming, to the cellar as well.

“Rosalind?” Lucien held out his hand to help her up.

“You’ve got your memory back.”

Lucien studied his petite wife, in awe of her steadfast determination to save him despite the danger to herself. Her bravery eclipsed that of most men. “I have.” If Mansfield had harmed her or done anything untoward, he’d kill the man with his bare hands. “Did Mansfield do anything?” He hesitated, unable to voice his fears.

“I’m fine. He didn’t force himself on me, although he intended to later on, once we arrived in France.”

Lucien felt relief first, then warmth swept his body followed by the desperate need to reassure himself she was in good health.

“I’m glad your memory has returned,” she said.

“Are you glad you’re married to George St. Clare, Viscount Hastings?” He didn’t want sympathy, but her answer mattered. He wanted a woman who’d meet him on equal terms, a woman who looked him straight in the face without a flinch.

She grinned and stepped close enough for Lucien to feel the warmth coming from her skin, the scent of lavender and Rosalind.

“It’s Lucien I fell in love with,” she whispered. Her words shivered through him, making him wish they were alone in his chamber. Her chin lifted while her blue eyes glinted with determination. “I don’t believe there was a George anywhere in the equation.”

Despite the men milling around them, Lucien bent his head to kiss his bride. The moment their lips touched, Lucien knew he was home.

Really home.

Chapter Twenty

The open carriage lurched and swayed over the uneven road. In the early dawn, the wind whistled in from the coast, bringing the invigorating tang of the sea.

Rosalind sat beside Lucien on the hard bench seat. With each successive rut in the road, she bounced hard enough to make her teeth rattle. She clutched the carriage sides, her body tense and uncomfortable. Yet, she wouldn't have it any other way.

"Thank you for arranging for Annie to come to work at Castle St. Clare," Rosalind said. "I felt guilty about locking her up and leaving her to face that horrid woman."

"Don't worry, sweetheart. Tickell will be glad of the help." Lucien urged the horses on, glancing around to check on Oberon, who trotted behind the carriage.

The castle appeared on the horizon. Squat and ugly, with glaring eyes, it looked like a nightmarish creature lying in wait for the unwary traveler.

She turned to smile at her husband, her heart feeling lighter than it had for a long time. "We're home."

He transferred the reins to one hand and reached over to squeeze her knee. "So we are." Satisfaction coated his voice. "Ugly, isn't it?"

The carriage clattered past the crumpling gatehouse and the grimacing gargoyles. Rosalind regarded them fondly.

The sky darkened when they drove through the avenue of trees leading to the castle courtyard. "I must arrange for a man from the village to trim the trees," Lucien remarked.

Rosalind recalled her initial arrival and the fright she and Mary had suffered. Her smile wavered as sorrow sliced deep. "Mansfield murdered Mary. She knew he was up to no good. She should have come to me instead of threatening him."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. We will remember her with fondness. She was a good friend to you."

The carriage creaked to a halt. Lucien tossed the reins to a stable lad and walked around to help Rosalind alight. His muscles flexed as he lifted her, despite the bandage with which she'd bound his arm earlier. Thank goodness it had been nothing more than a scratch, Mansfield's shot going wider than he'd intended.

Secure in his arms, Rosalind smiled at him and, when his solemn gaze met hers, her breath caught.

Her husband.

Charles sauntered from the Great Hall, a picture of elegance in dark gray breeches and a mauve waistcoat. "Rosalind! Lucien. Where have you been? Where's Mansfield? We've searched the village and the castle high and low."

"It's been a long night, and the story is even longer. Rosalind and I are hungry. Can we discuss this in the breakfast room?"

Ten minutes later, they joined the earl and Charles at the table while Tickell plied them with buttered toast and saw their cups were full of chocolate and coffee. Rosalind bit the inside of her cheek to keep laughter at bay. The man's ears were flapping so hard it was a wonder he didn't take flight like a bird.

"There you are," Lady Augusta said as she sailed into the room. "We were worried." She waited for Tickell to help seat her before turning expectantly to Rosalind at her side. "Where have you been?"

"We're sorry we alarmed you." Rosalind gently squeezed the elderly woman's hand, touched at the concern she perceived during the quick contact. Lady Augusta didn't usually rise from her bed this early.

Lucien started to explain.

"Mansfield kidnapped you?" Charles's voice held disbelief, despite the dried blood covering Lucien's shirt.

Lady Augusta rapped her knife against her china plate. "I don't believe it."

"I do." The earl sighed, looking older than his years. "It was because of me."

Pity filled Rosalind along with sorrow for the angry young boy and the misguided adult who'd hurt him. "Yes. He's a bitter man."

"What nonsense are you babbling about, girl?" Lady Augusta snapped.

The earl sighed again. "Mansfield is my son."

Tickell dropped a serving spoon. It clattered to the floor with a metallic clink. A choked sound came from Lady Augusta. Her face paled, and she slumped in her chair. “Say it isn’t true, St. Clare.”

“It’s true.” Lucien wiped his mouth with a linen napkin and dropped it on the table. He looked at his father, ignoring everyone else in the breakfast room. Rosalind’s hand crept under the table to clutch his and took comfort from his warmth. “I’ve regained my memory, Father. While I was in Italy, Mansfield blurted it out to me one night after we’d drunk several bottles of wine and brandy. I didn’t believe him. We fought. He left the inn with Charles and the others while I stayed. On my way home, I met with Mansfield and was attacked and left for dead.”

Tears filled the earl’s eyes as he stared at his son. His mouth worked, but no words emerged, so great was his emotion. It had Rosalind’s throat tightening, and even Lady Augusta surreptitiously wiped the moisture from her eyes.

Charles shot to his feet. “Mansfield was responsible for that? I don’t believe it. Mansfield is family. He wouldn’t do that.”

Lucien tensed, only relaxing when Rosalind squeezed his hand.

“Everything Lucien says is true. Mansfield kidnapped me,” Rosalind said. “He intended to kill Lucien and force me to marry him.”

Charles sank back to his chair, his face somber and concerned.

Lucien knew they were shocked. But there was yet more, and it was best they heard it all. “Mansfield led the smuggling ring in the village.”

“Mansfield was Hawk?” the earl asked. “Ah, that explains his absences. He skulked about as Hawk, letting us believe he was in London.”

Lucien gave an abrupt nod. “He found it a useful way to fill his pockets and keep tabs on the coming and goings at Castle St. Clare at the same time. He explored the old caves and came across the tunnels. He decided to use them to his advantage.”

“So he was responsible for the kitchen caving in,” Tickell said.

Rosalind spoke up. “From what he told me, his men were extending the passages underneath the castle so they could move their goods inland without fear of discovery. I believe the old excise man retired six months ago, and his replacement is younger and more vigorous in carrying out his duties. The rumor in the village is of more excise men being employed to stamp out the illegal trading along the East Coast.”

“They’ll find it difficult,” Charles said. “The local aristocracy are the smugglers’ biggest customers. Even the vicar buys tea from them.”

“Mansfield is a fool,” Lady Augusta said. “We haven’t replaced all those servants yet. Good servants are difficult to find. The tunnels were probably an excuse. He was after the treasure.”

“No, Lady Augusta,” Rosalind said, much more politely than Lucien thought his aunt warranted. “Mansfield wasn’t looking for treasure. He told me it was Charles.”

Everyone turned to stare at Charles.

“You?” Lady Augusta barked.

Charles shuffled on his chair like a child being disciplined for wrongdoing. “Yes. I discovered several references in a diary I found tucked away in the library. The treasure exists. There’s even a map.”

“A map?” Lady Augusta sniffed. “Rubbish!”

“It is not rubbish, Aunt,” Charles said with quiet dignity.

“Then why haven’t you found the treasure? Why have you kept it a secret?”

Everyone continued to watch Charles. Ruddy color collected high on his cheekbones, and he obviously wished he was elsewhere. “A mouse has eaten part of the map,” he said finally.

“That doesn’t explain why you didn’t tell us,” Lady Augusta said, accusation snapping in her eyes.

“Because you treat me like an idiot,” Charles fired back. “Just as you are doing now.”

“Where is Mansfield now?” the earl asked, butting in on his sister’s mumbling about stupid fools.

“He was locked in the cellar at the King’s Head in Whittlebury overnight,” Lucien said. “The magistrate decided to move him under guard to Dover, since the facilities are better there. He didn’t want Mansfield’s cohorts to overpower his jailors in Whittlebury to set him free. He’s to go on trial in Dover for kidnapping, attempted murder and possibly smuggling.”

“The magistrate probably buys brandy from Mansfield’s smugglers,” Charles muttered.

Even if this was the truth, the magistrate knew better than to free Mansfield. Lucien ignored the comment and turned to the earl.

His father made no pretence of eating, his plate lying untouched in front of him. He looked old and frail. “This is my fault. I was young and stupid, but I swear I never knew Mansfield was my child until Margery told me. By then, it was too late. I was married. Margery married soon after. I don’t think Gerald knew until later. We never spoke of it.” The earl’s faded blue eyes clouded as his mind drifted back to the past. “I never saw Margery or the boy until after Gerald died in the hunting accident. I tried to do my best for Mansfield, but he wanted more than I could give.”

Lucien felt a twinge of sympathy. His father hadn’t acted honorably and now he suffered for it. “Father, Mansfield can’t hurt anyone now. Put it in the past where it belongs.”

The earl turned to him, his emotions still close to the surface. “I’ve waited a long time to hear you call me Father. Glad you remembered.” He stood and Tickell handed him a cane. “I believe I’ll retire to my chamber.” He hobbled from the breakfast room. The cane tapped on the floor, highlighting his slow, pained progress.

Rosalind placed her eating utensils down. “I intend to retire to my chamber as well. Last night was a long one.”

“Would you like a maidservant to attend you, Lady Hastings?”

Lucien stood and moved behind Rosalind. “Send hot water for a bath, please, Tickell. I’ll attend my wife.”

Tickell barely blinked at the order. “Yes, my lord.”

“Scandalous,” Lady Augusta said. Charles laughed, and she nailed him with a dark glare. She gave a haughty sniff. “This treasure business is stuff and nonsense. A tale. There are no jewels. Tell me more of this map.”

Lucien took Rosalind’s arm. A sense of rightness accompanied the gesture. “I believe I’ll retire too,” he murmured next to her ear. “We’ll leave them to argue about the possibilities of treasure.”

Her blue eyes danced with silent humor. “Yesterday was very tiring. I might sleep for two days.”

“Good morning,” Lucien said, nodding at his aunt and Charles. They strolled down the Long Gallery. Lucien saw the portraits with new eyes. His ancestors.

“It’s good to have family,” Rosalind remarked.

Lucien stared at her, amazed at her uncanny timing. “I was just thinking that. I know their names.”

“I know you do.” She smiled gently, but her eyes were suddenly wary. “The villagers believe I’m a witch.”

“Rumors.”

“Yes, but like all rumors, there is an element of truth.” Although he knew of her gift, he probably hadn’t considered the tribulations involved on a day-to-day basis. “My ability to mind read, for example. The reality is that it doesn’t allow for much privacy and that scares most people, especially if I speak out of turn and blab something I shouldn’t.”

Lucien halted beside a rusty suit of armor and stared at his wife. “Can you read my mind right now?”

“I could hazard a guess, but recall that I need to touch to get an accurate reading.” She peeked at her husband from beneath lowered lashes, suddenly craving physical contact with him so she could tell exactly what he was thinking.

His dark eyes danced and a slow smile bloomed on his mouth. “I’ll have to remember not to touch you if I want to keep a secret.”

The tight grip around her heart loosened, but still she wanted reassurance, to hear the words. “That’s it? That’s all you intend to say? Does my gift not frighten you? Appall you? It’s likely I’ll pass it on to our children.”

Lucien heard frustration and bitterness in her voice. “You’ll help our children, should they inherit your gift,” he said, knowing it was nothing less than the truth. “Do you read my thoughts all the time?”

“I can, if I concentrate. When we were first married, it was more difficult, but now we…we…now it’s not.” The color in her cheeks deepened to a flattering pink and her eyes lowered.

Since they’d made love. Lucien grinned as smug male pride filled him.

“I try to block your thoughts as much as possible because it’s like eavesdropping. It’s not a polite thing to do.”

“Except when you’re investigating strange goings-on at the castle,” Lucien said. “Then you endanger yourself by using the gift.” They paused outside Rosalind’s chamber for Lucien to push open the door.

“You’re making fun of me.”

Lucien stared down at her bowed head. While her gift wouldn’t make their marriage an easy one, their relationship would be passionate and loving. Of that, he was in no doubt. Rosalind might be tiny, but she was feisty. He’d discovered he loved spirited women and this one in particular.

A maid looked up as they strolled into Rosalind's chamber arm-in-arm.

"Leave us," Lucien said, not removing his gaze from his wife. The maid giggled and Rosalind gasped. "Tell Tickell we'd like the bath sent to my chamber."

"Yes, my lord."

The door clicked shut behind the maid. The air throbbed between them. Lucien swept a hand down Rosalind's soft cheek, his hand grazing the pulse point at her throat. Her breath caught, the pulse beating faster.

"I love you, Rosalind." He slid pins from her hair until long strands fell loose around her shoulders.

Slowly her head rose and her gaze connected with his. A jolt of recognition seared his body.

She smiled softly. "I know. I love you too." She stood on tiptoe and pressed a kiss to his lips.

Lucien stepped away from temptation to strip off his crumpled black jacket. His blood-speckled shirt followed. "I'm not sure you do," he said, his voice quiet and solemn. "But you will after the next two days."

The color in her cheeks heightened, but her gaze never wavered. "I like the idea." Her blue eyes danced like a rippling Italian pool. "Show me."

One hand trailed lazily down his bare chest, while pure love blazed across her face. Lucien's heart slammed against his ribs. "With pleasure, my lady. We have an heir to produce." As he spoke, his hands busily undid laces and pushed fabric aside to reveal silken skin. He bent and pressed his lips to the tender place where her neck joined her shoulder. His teeth nipped lightly before soothing the bite with a gentle press of his lips. Rosalind made a soft sound of approval and arched her neck to give him better access.

"Do you like that?" Lucien didn't wait for an answer but whisked her dress down, baring her breasts. His breath caught as he smoothed the back of his hand across her plump curves. So beautiful. He had difficulty believing she was his wife.

"I'm not only your wife, but I love you." Her blue eyes twinkled up at him.

"It's going to take me time to get used to you reading my mind."

"I'm sorry," Rosalind said. "I—"

Lucien stopped her apology with a kiss. His lips slid across hers, nipping and tasting. Tormenting. Desire stirred, riding him hard. She was so

sweet. His, and a second chance for love.

He slid his hands down her shoulders and cupped her breasts before scooping her off her feet with a suddenness that made her squeak. He carried her over to the bed. After stripping off her remaining clothing, he yanked off his breeches, shoes and stockings and joined her. He drew her close, angled his mouth over hers and laced his hands into her long hair.

“Ah, Lucien,” she murmured.

Their naked limbs brushed together. Slowly, he explored her body with careful attention to detail. He touched her breasts, her shoulders, her belly, and her legs until she ached for his possession. Lucien wedged her thighs apart and surged into her body, kissing her fiercely at the same time. Rosalind arched into him. Frissons of desire spilled through her as they rocked together. The sensation built, growing bigger and bigger until the pleasure exploded inside her.

For a long time after, Rosalind clung to Lucien’s powerful shoulders, savoring the closeness, the feeling of togetherness, of being one with him and no longer rejected. Instead, his actions told of his love and the way he treasured her. This was security, and she was finally home.

She pressed a kiss to his muscular chest. The spurned viscountess had won the viscount’s heart.

About the Author

Shelley Munro lives in New Zealand with her husband. When she's not writing, she loves to travel and frequently drags her husband off to far-flung parts of the world. Not that he argues much. Enduring memories include being almost sat on by a mountain gorilla in Rwanda, lazing on white, sandy beaches in India, whale watching in Alaska, helmet diving in Bora-Bora, camel riding in Egypt, talkin' the blarney in Ireland, and dealing with ghosts in an English pub.

Cooking is fun (since she enjoys eating), and she likes to take photographs of everyone and everything. No one is safe from her camera lens. Someone should probably warn the dogs and puppies Shelley and her husband are about to foster for the RSPCA. Readers beware! Cute animal photos ahead…You can visit Shelley at http://www.shelleymunro.com.

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ISBN: 978-1-4268-9058-1

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